

# SIGGLES IN AFRICA



# BIGGLES IN AFRICA

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## CHAPTER I

### A PILOT PASSES

BIGGLES looked up from the breakfast table of his Mount Street flat as his two friends, Algy Lacey and Ginger Hebblethwaite, walked into the room. From their shining faces and the dressing-gowns they wore it was clear that they had come direct from the bathroom, and Biggles eyed them with frank disapproval.

'What 's the matter with you fellows lately ?' he asked coldly.

'Speaking for myself, nothing,' replied Algy cheerfully. 'Why ?'

'I was wondering if you'd contracted sleepy-sickness or something. You get later and later. It 's nearly half-past nine—a nice time to roll down to brekker, I must say. Well, you'll be unlucky tomorrow ; I've told Mrs Symes to clear the table at eight-thirty in future.'

'Why all the hurry?' inquired Algy imperturbably, as he pulled out a chair and seated himself at the table. 'There 's nothing much to get up for, anyway, is there? None of us has done a day's work for weeks, not since we wound up Cronfeldt's gold-running racket I can't understand what all the crooks are doing. If somebody doesn't soon start something I shall sink into a condition of permanent coma.'

'And when they do you'll be the first to grouse.'

'Not me; anything would be better than mooning about here.'

'I don't know what you've got to grumble at; you've had plenty of flying.'

'Am I a pupil at a flying school that I must go round and round the sky with nowhere to go and nothing to do? I hardly like to confess it, but I am afraid that flying for the sake of flying no longer amuses me. I wish to goodness some one would ask us to go and fetch something from somewhere, or take something somewhere, or start an air line, or a war—anything.'

'Well, your wish may be fulfilled sooner than you expect.'

Algy started, and a slow smile spread over Ginger's face.

'What ho I Out with it; there's something in the wind,' declared Algy shrewdly. 'What is it?'

'Go and put on your jackets, both of you, and I'll tell you,' promised Biggles. 'I'm expecting a

visitor, and I don't want to create the impression that this is a home for invalid inebriates.'

As they left the room Biggles picked up a letter that lay on the table in front of him and read it for the third or fourth time. He was still pondering over it when Algy and Ginger returned, eager expectation written on their faces.

'Well, get it off your chest,' invited Algy, reaching a long arm for the coffee-pot.

'If you'll sit down and behave like a little gentleman instead of grabbing things like a famished tramp let loose in a tuck-shop, I'll begin.'

Algy pulled the toast-rack and the marmalade within easy reach 'Go ahead,' he said cheerfully, 'I'm all ears.'

'There is no need for you to advertise what any one looking at you could hardly fail to see,' murmured Biggles pointedly, with his eyes on the sheet of paper he still held in his hands. 'This letter,' he continued quickly, 'is from Mr. Felix Marton. Does that name convey anything to

you?'

Algy shook his head. 'Nothing,' he said sadly. 'Not a blooming thing.'

But Ginger raised a hand. 'Marton's Marathon Motor-bikes?' he suggested.

Biggles nodded. 'Quite right,' he said. 'The maker of the world-famous speed-track models is, I suspect, in trouble. Listen—this is what he says:

'Marton's Motor-cycles, Ltd.,

Birmingham.

Dear Major Bigglesworth,

I am taking the liberty of writing this letter to you because your name has been suggested to me by Colonel Raymond of Scotland Yard—whom I met recently at a dinner party—

as the most likely man to help me to solve a very grievous problem. Business will take me to London to-morrow, Thursday, so I propose to call on you. I have several appointments during the day, so the time will probably be early in the forenoon. I will leave the subject on which I wish to consult you until then.

Yours sincerely, FELIX MARTON.'

'I like the word "consult",' grinned Ginger. 'Sounds like good detective stuff to me.'

'Have you any idea what it 's about,' inquired Algy.

'Yes.' Biggles lit a cigarette. 'The name was

familiar to me at once, quite apart from motor-bikes, and after a few minutes' deep reflection I re-called the association. Don't you remember, about a year ago, a young fellow named Marton—' Biggles broke off as the front door bell whirred. 'I should say this is our visitor—or, as Ginger would perhaps prefer to say, our client,' he con-cluded.

Be serious, everybody.'

There came a knock on the door, which a moment later was opened by Mrs. Symes. 'Mr.

Felix Marton, sir,' she said, and withdrew, leaving the famous motorcycle manufacturer with the three airmen.

'Sit down, sir,' said Biggles respectfully, pulling forward a chair, at the same time running a quick eye over the visitor.

He saw a man of about fifty years of age whose snow-white hair and sad face, accentuated by the dark clothes he wore, told a story of acute suffering. His manner was listless, although there was more than a suggestion of old-time courtesy in it.

'Allow me to introduce my two very good friends and comrades,' continued Biggles. '

Captain Lacey and Mr. Hebblethwaite.'

Mr. Marton bowed. 'I am honoured to make your acquaintance, gentlemen,' he said gravely.

'And now, sir,' went on Biggles, 'we are entirely at your service.'

'I have come to talk to you about my son,' said Mr. Marton slowly, looking Biggles squarely in the face.

'Yes, I rather thought that was the object of your visit,' nodded Biggles. 'I've just been speaking on the telephone to the Secretary of the Royal Aero Club to refresh my memory with the circumstances of—but never mind that Please tell us your story in your own way. What I have heard is, of course, the official version, which does not necessarily mean that it is the correct one—at least, in the matter of detail.'

'Then I think I had better start right at the beginning,' observed the old man. 'Really, the story begins about two years ago when my son Harry—my only son, I may say—

persuaded me against my better judgement to allow him to learn to fly. I have nothing against aviation, don't think that, but my wife is dead and the boy was all I had left to care for, so not unnaturally I was loth to let him take the slightest risk of injuring himself.

However, like many other young fellows, flying made an irresistible appeal to him, and in the end he had his own way. He joined the Midland Aero Club, and judging by the reports of his instructors, he soon became a pilot of exceptional ability, taking both his 'A' and 'B' Licences within a year. But he soon began to look for new worlds to

conquer. In particular he took a great interest in record-breaking flights, and at length conceived a plan for making such a flight himself. He decided to attack the England to Capetown record. From a financial point of view I had nothing against it, because I am what the world would call a rich man, but I was apprehensive for his safety and I told him so. Well, he overruled my protests, and in the end, having bought a new Puss Moth for the purpose, he set out. That was just over a year ago.

'I needn't go into the details of the earlier part of the flight; as far as one can gather they were quite normal. All went well, and at Malakal, which as you probably know is in Central Africa, he was several hours in front of his time schedule. Now this is where the unhappy part of the affair begins. He landed at Malakal at ten-thirty in the morning, rather tired, but as fit as the proverbial fiddle and with his engine running perfectly. He refuelled, had a cold bath, and half an hour later took off again bound for Juba.'

'You've confirmed that, I suppose?' put in Biggles.

'Oh, yes. There 's not much doubt about it, anyway. He was flying down the Imperial route, and Malakal is an important station, with radio equipment, and so on. The officials there are unanimous that he was well and had nothing on his mind. He was seen to take off, and as he left the ground the wireless operator advised the control officer at Juba to be on the look-out for him. But he never arrived. From that moment the flight is wrapped in mystery. Days passed, grew into weeks, and still no word came. Imperial Airways pilots kept a sharp look-out for a crash on the ground, but they saw nothing, although the country at that point is fairly open—sandy plain for the most part, dotted with clumps of thorn and mimosa trees. A crash would be visible for miles. Now mark this well. At the same time as Harry took off from Malakal, bound for Juba, the Imperial Airways Atalanta air-liner Arethusa took off from Juba bound for Malakal. They should have passed each other somewhere about mid-way between the two points. But they didn't.

Captain Cuthbertson, who was flying the air-liner, is absolutely emphatic that no machine could have passed him—travelling

in the opposite direction, of course--without his seeing it. Visibility was perfect. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. So the obvious inference is that Harry disappeared between Malakal and a point half-way to Juba.'



Mr. Marton stopped and took from his attache case a large-scale map of Central Africa, which he opened out on the table. 'Here is a map of the district kindly given to me by Imperial Airways. It is one of the same sort as they issue to their pilots.' He pointed to a spot in the centre of the map. 'Here is Malakal,' he said.

'And now we come to a very curious incident,' he went on. 'It is the only clue we have that throws any light on the mystery, although in some respects it tends to deepen it.

Three weeks after Harry disappeared, a white hunter named Major Lawton arrived at Nairobi, in Kenya Colony, and on hearing about the missing machine he made a statement. He said that on the day in question he was on safari—that is, on the march—

with his native porters, in the district concerned. When about a hundred and fifty miles south of Malakal he saw a red monoplane gliding down in the direction of Insula with its engine off. The Puss Moth is, as you know, a monoplane, and Harry's machine was painted red. Major Lawton did not pay much attention to it, assuming that the pilot was one of the now numerous Cape flyers, as was, in fact, the case. He thought no more about it until he got back to Nairobi. Now this place Insula is, to my mind, the crux of the whole affair. When Major Lawton's report reached me I chartered an aeroplane and flew out to make inquiries on the spot. I saw Major Lawton, and what he told me left no doubt in my mind that Harry was actually gliding down into the aerodrome at Insula when he saw him.'

'Insula? I've never heard of the place,' muttered Biggles curiously.

'Precisely! Very few people have, and inquiries revealed a peculiar state of affairs. It appears that many years ago, when the Cape route was first projected, it was proposed to establish an aerodrome in a stretch of open country known locally as Insula. The ground was cleared of ant-hills and other obstructions—by R.A.F. personnel, I understand—and the usual white chalk ring laid down on the ground to make it conspicuous to airmen. At that juncture it was no more than an emergency landing-ground—which, for that matter, it still is. Subsequently, Imperial Airways decided not to have an aerodrome there, and the place was abandoned. But about four years ago their head office received an application from a Greek trading concern in Cairo for permission to use the aerodrome. They offered to pay a small fee, and did, in fact, do so.

The only stipulation Imperial Airways made was that they should keep

the place in order and hold a supply of petrol for the convenience of passing aircraft—not that they imagined that the place would be used very often.'

'What reason did these Greeks give for wanting to use such an out-of-the-way place ?'

inquired Biggles.

'It was quite feasible. They said they were anxious to experiment with the culture of high-grade Turkish tobacco, for which the ground there was eminently suitable. It is. A lot of tobacco is now grown in Africa, as you know, but unfortunately most of it is rather coarse. They hoped to produce something better. The place was a long way from Cairo, so their idea, they said, was to get an aeroplane and fly to and fro, leaving the actual crop in the hands of an overseer and using the old aerodrome at Insula as a base.

Now here is another curious fact. Imperial Airways tell me that for two years this Greek concern paid its rent, but

after that they heard nothing more and assumed that the whole thing had been dropped, or gone smash. So they were quite surprised when I was able to inform them that when I landed on the aerodrome it was obviously still in use, or had been until recently. A supply of petrol is held there in charge of a half-caste fellow who appears to act as a sort of caretaker-storeman. Now this is very odd. When I tackled this fellow about Harry he expressed surprise, and declared that he knew nothing about him ; but later, when I told him in pretty strong terms that Major Lawton had seen Harry's machine land—I stretched a point deliberately—he admitted it.'

'He admitted lying ?'

'No. Oh no. He gave a well-simulated start of astonishment and said it had slipped his memory. He did remember, now that I reminded him, that a red aeroplane had landed.

The pilot, whose name he did not know, was having a little trouble with his engine, but he quickly effected repairs and took off again, heading south, presumably for Juba. That was all, except that he admitted that the Greek tobacco company still paid him a small retaining fee to look after the place, and that once in a while their machine landed there. That this

was true is proved by the fact that when Imperial Airways approached the company for arrears of rent, they paid up without a word. Well, my pilot and I stayed there for a week, during which time we searched the district for signs of a crash, but in vain. There was nothing more we could do. That 's the story, Major Bigglesworth, but I am far from satisfied that it is the end of it. Something happened to Harry at Insula—I am certain of it

; but the authorities won't take the matter up on such flimsy evidence, and I can't say that I alto-gether blame them. What happened to Harry ? Where is his machine ? Africa is a big place, but there are very few square miles of it that are not traversed by somebody, black or white, during the year. A wrecked aeroplane is a conspicuous object, and the discovery of one could not long go unre-marked. Native gossip would soon reach the ears of political officers, and the world would quickly know what had happened to my poor boy.'

Biggles stared moodily at the hearthrug for some time while his fingers drummed a soft tattoo on the table. Then he looked up. 'What was your object in coming to see me, Mr.

Marton ?' he said.

'I was hoping that you would be open to con-sider a proposition.'

'To go to Africa to find—the crash ?'

'I'm by no means sure that you would find a crash.'

'Why not ?'

'Because I don't think Harry did crash.'

'Oh, come—come, Mr. Marton. What other trouble could overtake an aeroplane in Africa ?'

'That 's what I want you to find out. I am not superstitious, and it's not merely a hope born of a father's anxiety, but something inside me tells me that my boy is still alive—

that he has been the victim of circumstances beyond his control. I may be wrong, but what I want is proof. This uncertainty is killing me. If I were sure that he had crashed and been killed—well, it would be a dreadful blow, but I should at least know the worst. It's this disappearing into thin air—'

'Many other machines have disappeared, Mr. Marton. Disappeared without trace.'

'I know, but if you'll examine the records you will see that that sort of thing has always happened near the sea. Whenever a machine has disappeared inland, sooner or later the crash has been found.'

Biggles nodded. 'Yes, I must admit you're right there,' he agreed.

'The spot where Harry disappeared is a thou-

sand miles from the sea, and his machine had a cruising range of only five hundred miles. He could not have reached the sea even if he had wanted to.'

'He could, by refuelling.'

'In which case there would be a record of where he refuelled. People don't give petrol away. He would have paid for it. He was flying due south, and on that course he was three thousand miles from the sea. Can you imagine any reason why a pilot, intent on breaking a long-distance record, should deviate from his course by a single mile?'

'None whatever. That is, not voluntarily. He might be blown off his course by dirty weather.'

'At the time of which we are speaking the weather was perfect. That's what makes it all the more inexplicable.'

Biggles bit his bottom lip reflectively. 'A curious business,' he admitted. He looked up at Mr. Marton. 'Such a trip as the one you propose would cost a lot of money,' he observed warningly.

'As far as I'm concerned money doesn't enter into it. I have plenty, but what is the use of it to me without my boy? I'd willingly give every penny of it to know the truth.'

'It seems to me to be a matter of time,' went on

Biggles presently. 'Making Insula our base, we could divide the whole country up into sections, and search every one of them thoroughly. If we did that, sooner or later we should find the crash, but I'm afraid it might take a very long time.'

The motor-cycle magnate sprang to his feet. 'Harry's machine is somewhere in Africa to-day, either intact or a mangled wreck,' he

cried, 'and I'm going to spend every penny of my fortune looking for it. Will you help me?'

Biggles moved uneasily, and glanced at his partners. 'Well  
' he began haltingly.

'You can name your own terms,' offered Mr. Marton.

Biggles shook his head. 'I wasn't thinking so much about money,' he said.

'Will you go?'

Biggles nodded. 'Yes,' he said, 'I'll go, but as I've said, it's likely to be a big job. I think the only fair way would be for you to finance the expedition, paying all expenses, and paying myself and my co-pilots a flat rate worked out on a time basis.'

'Anything you like. You shall have a draft on my bank immediately. Further—although I'

am not doing this as an inducement, because I know you'll do everything in your power anyway—the day you find Harry's machine, crashed or intact, I'll pay you five thousand pounds. And if you find Harry, or—his grave—I'll double it.'

Biggles rose to his feet. 'That 's very generous of you,' he said. 'I trust that we may be successful.' 'When will you start?'

'Just as soon as the Royal Aero Club can get permits for us to fly over foreign territory. If you don't hear from us you will know that we have nothing to report, but be assured that we shall be doing our best. If we discover anything we will cable you at once.'

'Thank you, my boy.'

Biggles held out his hand. 'Good-bye, sir,' he said warmly.

'Good-bye, and may God help you in your search.'

Biggles closed the door behind the unhappy father, and then walked slowly back into the room. 'It looks as if we've only escaped von Stalhein's bullets to make a dinner for lions,'

he observed whimsically. 'Any one who fancies his chance as a wild-beast tamer can start packing his kit; I'm going round to the Aero

Club.'

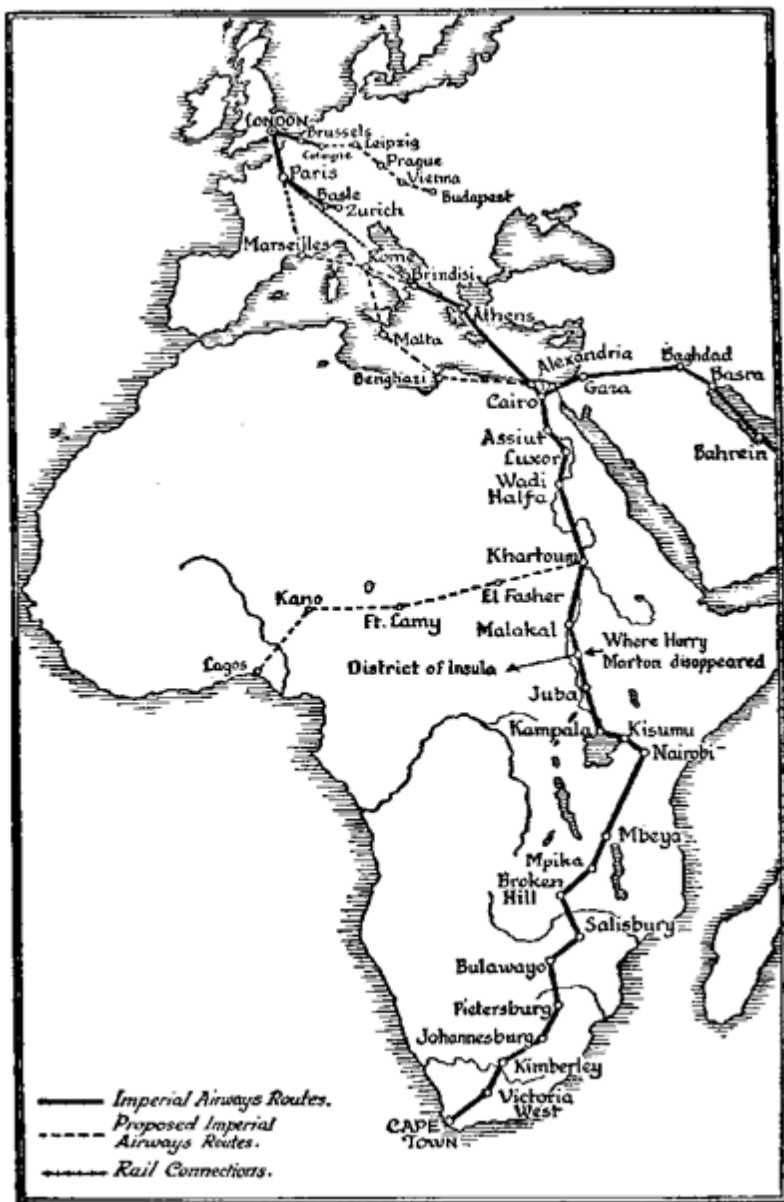
## CHAPTER II

### DOWN THE AFRICAN TRAIL

TEN days later he touched his wheels lightly on the sun-baked aerodrome at Malakal and taxied slowly towards the rest-house to refuel.

So far the trip had not been entirely uneventful. After some consideration and consultation with the others, he had decided on a Dragon Moth as the most suitable aeroplane for their task. It was roomy, and the two engines, besides giving them an ample reserve of power, enabled them to carry a heavy load of provisions and spare parts, for they had no delusions about the magnitude of the undertaking. To find a burnt-out aeroplane crash—for that was what, in his heart, Biggles expected to find—even if the approximate position of it were known, would have been no easy matter; but with an area of many thousands of square miles to search—for he did not overlook the fact that the Puss Moth could have headed in any direction after it left Insula—it became formidable.

Like Harry Marton, he had followed the Imperial route all the way, telling no one of their purpose, but allowing the aerodrome officials to



assume that the Dragon was merely on a pleasure cruise to Capetown. They had run into the usual bumpy weather over Egypt, had struck a habooM between Wadi Haifa and Khartoum, and had spent some anxious minutes with an engine missing fire over the dreaded Sudd, the great expanse of croco-dile-infested papyrus swamp south of the Sudan, where roamed herds of elephants, secure from the ever-advancing tide of civilization. To the east lay Abyssinia ; to the south, the vast Tanganyika Territory ; and to the west, the very heart of the

dark continent—the Belgian Congo, merging in its northern extremity into the waterless wastes of the Sudan.

'Fill her up, please,' Biggles told the ground engineer, as he climbed out and stretched before walking towards the shade of the rest-house, for the rays of the sun were pouring down with fierce intensity.

Algy and Ginger followed him, mopping their faces, their solar topees tilted back.

'Sort of warmish, eh ?' grinned Ginger.

'VWhat else did you expect it to be on the Equator?' smiled Biggles.

Hahob is the local name for the fierce sandstorms that sweep across this part of the world.

'Are we actually on it ?'

'Your feet are toeing the line—or they would be if there was one. But wait a minute. I want to have a word or two with this chap.' Biggles paid his fees and then invited the engineer into the rest-house for some refreshment. He was an English-man, they found, Harker by name.

'Do you remember a fellow named Marton coming in here about twelve months ago ?'

Biggles asked casually.

The engineer glanced up. ought to; I filled

up his tanks for him,' he answered simply. 'Funny business, the way he disappeared into the blue.'

Harker nodded.

'What do you suppose happened to him?'

'Oh, he went down in the bush somewhere. Chewed up by lions or hyenas by this time.' It was clear that the engineer was not particularly interested.

'There's a rumour that he went down at In-sula,' prompted niggles, athirst for any scrap of information, however meagre.

'Yes, I heard that.'



'They tell me it's run by some Greeks now.' 'So I believe.'

'Ever see anything of them ?'

'Once, a long time ago. At least, I think it must have been them.'

'How long ago?'

'It must be about eighteen months. There was a Greek flying with a French pilot.'

'Know anything about them ?'

'Nothing.'

It was obvious that Harker was not inclined to be communicative. Biggles was not surprised. The man looked tired and full of fever. Between them, the sun and the mosquitoes had played havoc with his constitution.

'Do you remember what they were flying ?' asked Biggles.

'French machine. Open cockpit biplane, about ten years old by the look of it. Why all these questions ?'

'Just interested. I know Marton's father, so I thought that as I was passing through, I'd see if I could pick up any information. Well, I'll be getting along.'

'Is Juba your next stop ? I'll signal them that you're on your way, if you like.'

'No, thanks,' replied Biggles quickly. 'As a matter of fact, Imperials have asked us to have a look at Insua on the way down—only keep that to yourself.'

'Why—are they thinking of operating it up ?' 'No; I think they're just mildly interested to know what sort of a state it's in.'

'I see. Well, we'll be seeing you on the way back, I expect.'

'I expect so,' answered Biggles non-committally, as he walked towards the Dragon.

'Nothing much to be picked up here, by the look of it,' observed Algy quietly.

didn't expect anything. That fellow's got no axe to grind. As far as he's concerned, Harry Marton was just one of many:

They got back into the machine, took off and headed south for the deserted aerodrome of Insula.

Biggles found it rather more than an hour later, not without difficulty, for there was little to distinguish it from the rest of the inhospitable terrain, which was flat, studded with groups of curious, flat-topped trees and outcrops of grey stone. Farther to the west the country was more thickly wooded, although it remained fairly open, not unlike parkland in Europe, but with short, yellow, sun-dried grass instead of greensward.

'I think this must be the place,' muttered

Biggles, looking down. 'But I understood there was a white ring to mark the centre of the landing area.'

'So there should be,' declared Ginger. 'I remember Mr. Marton saying so. So did the Imperial Airways people when I went down to make inquiries about the place.'

'Well, it isn't here now.'

'Got covered up by a dust-storm, perhaps.' 'In that case the fellow in charge should have cleared again.'

'That 's right enough,' muttered Algy. 'Hello, there he is now. I saw him pop out from under the trees and take a look at us. He's gone back in again now.'

'Funny!'

'Why funny?'

'That he should hop back in,' observed Biggles, as he throttled back and began a long glide towards the arid brown earth that formed the surface of the aerodrome. 'I've seen thousands of aeroplanes land in my time, but if I was down there I should certainly be out on the tarmac watching this machine land. It 's the natural thing to do. I'll bet ninety-nine people out of a hundred would. That fellow can't see so many aeroplanes here that he is sick of the sight of them. I shall be interested to have a look at him.'

There was not very much wind, but what little there was came from

the south-west, making it necessary for the machine to glide in over the primitive aerodrome buildings.

The airmen all looked down as they swept low over them, but not a soul was in sight, and a moment later the Dragon bumped its wheels rather heavily on the hard earth some distance beyond.

A frown of displeasure crossed Biggles's face as the machine bounced to a standstill. 'If either of you ever flies this machine while we're here, be careful,' he warned the others. '

We're on the great African plateau, and what with the heat and the rarefied atmosphere, she drops like a brick the instant you flatten out. And just a last word of advice before I taxi in. From now on anything might happen. Don't ask me what because I don't know, but the feeling I have in my bones doesn't often let me down. That tool-chest must always be kept locked, and the case with our rifles in. Keep your automatics handy, but don't let any one see them. And finally, not a word about the job we're on. If it becomes necessary to mention young Marton, leave it to me. Eyes open and mouths shut is our motto, although naturally I shall have to have a word or two with this fellow in charge of the aerodrome. What did Mr. Marton say his name was ?'

'Sarda—Luke Sarda,' Ginger reminded him.

'That 's it. Well, here we are. If nothing occurs to make an alteration of plan advisable, I shall stick to the original scheme and start a systematic search of the whole area.

Anybody got any questions to ask ?'

There was no reply, so niggles taxied up to where a reed-thatched rest-house stood in the doubtful shade of a coppice of old, almost leafless trees. Near it was a hangar built almost entirely of reeds, or elephant grass, now in the last stages of dilapidation. A short distance away, in a clearing amongst the trees, was another building, a bungalow, more solidly built of square timber, and roofed with corrugated iron.

'I expect that 's the manager's residence,' observed Biggles, glancing in its direction, as they all stepped out of the machine. 'And this looks like the lad himself,' he went on as a massive figure, clad in little more than rags, appeared from the far side of the building and hurried towards them.

'Phew! What a beauty,' breathed Ginger. 'If looks are anything to go

by, I should say he's the sort of bloke who would stab his blind grandmother for her money-box.'

'The trouble is, you can't always judge by looks,' murmured Biggles. 'Ssh, leave the talking to me.'

Together they stood in the shadow of the Dragon's wings and waited for the aerodrome manager to come up to them. As Ginger had observed, if appearances were anything to go by the man looked capable of any vice or crime. In the first place he was clearly a half-breed, with the black predominant, although his hair was long and straight. His mouth was large, with loose lips, from a corner of which a ghastly scar ran trans-versely across his face to the opposite side of the forehead, straight across the right eye—or rather, the socket where it should have been. The weapon that had made the scar had obviously destroyed the eye at the same time. Nor was this unpleasant picture improved by innumerable pock-marks that dotted the man's face. His one saving grace was his physique, for he was well over six feet in height, although this did nothing to make his appearance less forbidding. Nor did his clothes, such as they were. A pair of calico trousers, torn, and filthy

beyond description, topped by the remains of an old striped pyjama jacket, open from the throat to the waist, completed his outfit. He wore nothing on his feet, not even sandals.

'Good afternoon. You're Mr. Sarda, I suppose ?' began Biggles.

'Yaas, that's me,' replied the 'manager', in passable English. 'You want petrol, huh ?'

'You keep a stock here then, do you?'

'Yaas.'

'I don't need any at present, but I shall later on.' 'When you come back—huh ?'

'No, I'm going to stay here for a little while.'

If this announcement caused Sarda any surprise,

he did not show it. 'Plenty mosquito, plenty sand

fly, plenty fever,' he grunted pessimistically. 'We've got plenty of quinine and mosquito curtains,' Biggles told him.

'Plenty booze, perhaps—huh ?'

'Sorry, but I'm afraid that's where we must disappoint you.'

'What you come here for—huh ?'

'We've come to make a report on the aerodrome for the government, and look round for other suitable sites,' Biggles told him casually.

'No grub here.'

'No matter, we've got plenty ; and if we run short we can easily run up to Malakal for more,' answered Biggles. 'I suppose you've got plenty of water ?'

'No water.'

'What ?'

'Plenty rain-water. All right for engine but no use for drink. Plenty dysentery.'

'Well, I expect we shall get over that difficulty,' observed Biggles with expressionless face. 'Just get the hangar door open and we'll put our machine inside out of the sun.'

'We'd better give him a hand,' suggested Algy, as the half-breed began folding back the flimsy doors.

Together they got the machine inside and then went down to the rest-house. It was in a filthy condition, but Biggles kept back the criticism that rose to his lips, for he had no wish to antagonize the man at the outset.

'Have you been here very long?' he asked, as he surveyed with disgust not unmingled with alarm the tangle of cobwebs that festooned the under side of the thatch.

'Four years—maybe five.'

'Don't see many aeroplanes down this way, I suppose ?'

'No planes come here.'

'Some time since you had a visitor, eh?' 'Six months or more.'

'Is that why you did away with the white ring on the aerodrome ?'

'It got washed out with the rains,' muttered the half-breed sullenly.

'Yes, of course, it would,' murmured Biggles, as if he was quite satisfied with the explanation. 'By the way, isn't this the place where that lad—what was his name .. .

Marton, that's it—landed, just before he disappeared ?' Biggles's manner was in-consequential, as if the matter was of no real interest to him.

There was a moment's silence. 'Yaas,' said Sarda slowly.

'Funny business to disappear like that.' Glancing up suddenly, Biggles caught Sarda's eyes on him, and what he saw in them sent a cold shiver down his spine. In the circumstances he decided that no good purpose would be served by pursuing the matter farther. 'I think we'd better get our things out of the machine and fix ourselves up,' he said, turning to the others.

'How long you stay ?' asked Sarda dispassionately.

'Not more than a day or two, I hope,' returned Biggles truthfully. 'But don't worry about us: we can look after ourselves. I suppose you'll be about in case we happen to want you?

,

The half-caste nodded towards the bungalow. 'Yaas,' he said, 'in there.' Then, suddenly, his single eye switched, and following it with his own, Biggles saw what it was that had attracted his attention. A slim centipede, nearly a foot long, had emerged from under the eaves of the rest-house and was gliding down the wall with a horrible concertina-like movement. Sarda's eyes followed it, coldly. Slowly, his hand went inside his jacket and came out holding a heavy knife by the blade. His arm went up and back. There was a glint of flying steel, a dull thud, and the centipede squirmed violently, transfixed to the wall.

'Good shot,' cried Ginger warmly.

'Very good indeed,' agreed Biggles, in a peculiar voice, catching Algy's eye.

'I always kill--centipedes,' said Sarda suavely, as he retrieved his knife and severed the body of the reptile in half a dozen places.

Biggles shuddered. 'It's the best thing to do with them,' he answered lightly. 'Come on, chaps, let 's go and get our things out. . . . I've often wondered what centipedes are for, but now I know,' he added quietly, a few moments later, as they walked towards the hangar.

Ginger glanced up. 'How so, Chief ?' he asked.

'To teach hard-working airmen to watch their step,' murmured Biggles ambiguously. '

When a fellow can throw a knife as well as Mr. Sarda it's a good thing to know it. I fancy he wanted us to know, too. He must have spent many hours practising to reach such a degree of accuracy, but he didn't waste all that time for the mere purpose of slaying centipedes, you can bet your life on that. I am instinctively suspicious of gentlemen who are as proficient in the employment of lethal weapons as our one-eyed friend, and the less we see of him the better I shall be pleased. If ever we fall out with him, and I have a feeling that we may, don't forget to duck when his hand goes inside his shirt. To start with, he's a liar.'

Algy raised his eyebrows.

'Didn't you notice that patch of oil outside the hangar ?' went on Biggles. 'It's black, burnt-out stuff such as could only have come out of an engine, yid it's been there less than twenty-four hours, or it would be covered with a layer of dust. He said a machine hasn't been here for six months,

but I know better ; a machine has been ticking over on this aerodrome within the last two days. And Mr. Sarda knows it ; that 's why he doesn't want us here. Didn't you notice how he raised every objection he could think of to prevent us from staying here ? No food, no water, but plenty of fever. Well, we shall see. Come on, let 's get our things fixed up. We'll spend the rest of the day getting settled and start flying in the morning.

Strewth! Isn't it hot!'

By sundown they had carried their kit and stores into the rest-house, leaving a few tins of food and chocolate in the machine as a precaution against starvation in the event of a forced landing. The rest-house, they soon perceived, was likely to prove a misnomer, for it consisted only of one large rectangular room, with a dirt floor over which innumerable ants worked conscientiously at their self-appointed tasks. The walls were built of dried mud bricks, known in

Spanish America as adobe, and the roof was thatched with a thick layer of tinder-dry reeds or papyrus that had evidently been brought from a river or water-hole.

'I don't think an awful lot of this place,' confessed Biggles. 'But we shall have to put up with it for the time being, at any rate. I should hate to think of the crawling things that live in thatch. I'd rather sleep in the open, and so I would but for the fact that I'd rather be bitten by a flea than a lion. It 's no use starting operations by getting our heads chewed off in our sleep.'

They cleared up the place as far as it was possible, and then set up their mosquito-curtained camp beds, standing the feet in pans of paraffin. They scrubbed the table with carbolic soap, and then piled on it such stores as would be required immediately, together with small kit such as toilet things and flash lamps, which might be needed at any time.

There was nothing more they could do, so they went outside and sat on the crude bench that had been provided for the purpose by whoever had built the rest-house.

Already the disk of the sun, a glowing crimson ball, was sinking swiftly over the distant horizon, while the outskirts of the aerodrome were lost in vague, purple shadows. All was still, silent; nothing moved. It was almost as if nature herself was closing her eyes in sleep.

suppose there are lions and things wandering

about out there,' reflected Ginger in a low voice.

As if in answer a deep, vibrant roar rose menac-

ingly on the sultry air ; it came from far away, rolled sullenly across the deserted landscape and lost itself again in the distance.

'There 's your answer,' smiled Biggles. 'That 's the voice of Africa speaking—straight from the lion's mouth.'

'Doesn't sound so good out here as it does at the Zoo,' muttered Ginger, frowning 'Hadn't we better get the rifles out ?'

'I don't think so. Nothing is likely to worry us, except mosquitoes.'

'Hark! What was that ?'



A harsh, coughing grunt had come from some-where in the trees behind them.

'Don't ask me,' protested Biggles. 'I should say it was a crocodile, or a leopard, but I'm no wild-beast expert. At a rough guess there are probably a hundred different sorts of wild animals, birds and reptiles, wandering about the landscape within a few miles of us—

lions, leopards, hyenas, ele-phants, jackals, ostriches, hippos, rhinos, buffaloes, zebras, giraffes, antelopes, and goodness knows what else—and if you're going to say "what was that" every time one of them makes a noise, you'll give us all the heebie-jeebies. I don't know any more about them than you do, except hyenas and jackals, and we've seen plenty of them, haven't we, Algy ?'

Algy nodded. 'Too many,' he answered moodily.

'Well, I think we'd better turn in,' observed Biggles presently. 'We've had a longish day, and we've got another long day in front of us to-morrow.' He led the way back into the rest-house, and Ginger closed the door behind them.

'So this is Africa,' he observed facetiously.

'Just the first sniff of it,' agreed Biggles, 'but we're going to see plenty more of it before we're through with this job, unless I'm very much mis-taken,' he added thoughtfully.

A raucous howl split the night air not far away. It rose to a quavering scream, and then subsided in a series of ghastly chuckles and gurgles. Another joined it, and another, until the night became hideous with the clamour.

Ginger started up. 'What in the name of good-ness is that ?' he gasped.

'Hyenas,' replied Biggles laconically. 'If you say "what's that" again, I'll throw you out to them.'

### CHAPTER III

#### AN UNPLEASANT PASSENGER

BIGGLES was the first to awake the following morn-

ing. It was still quite early, scarcely more than the break of dawn, with the stars paling in a pearly sky.

'Come on, you fellows,' he cried, throwing back his mosquito net and springing out of bed.

'What 's the hurry ?' grumbled Algy.

'The sooner we're in the air the better,' Biggles told him crisply. 'It should be quite nice in the air now, but presently it will get as hot as the dickens and the heat-haze will spoil visibility. I've been thinking, and I've come to the conclusion that there is no necessity for all of us to fly every time the machine takes the air. It would only mean carrying extra weight, besides tiring us out more quickly than if we worked in relays. I sug-gest that we take it in turns, or it 's quite likely that we shall be sick to death of the job before we've covered half our territory. Suppose Ginger comes with me now while you stay behind, Algy, and knock up some breakfast. We'll do, say, two hours, and then, after breakfast, you can take a turn at the stick.'

'I think that 's a sound idea,' declared Algy.

'Good enough; then that 's settled. Slip your things on, Ginger; we'll wash and eat when we get back. Algy, you might come along and give us a hand to start up.'

Together they walked along to the hangar, Algy still in his pyjamas, with a pair of canvas shoes on his feet, and the others in trousers and sweaters, caps, and goggles. The usual heavy flying kit was unnecessary, for although the dawn air was quite chilly they knew that the heat would be intense later on.

Biggles glanced suspiciously at the pool of oil as they passed it. 'Be careful of Sarda, Algy,' he said seriously. 'There is something going on here or it wouldn't be necessary for him to lie, although whether or not that has anything to do with Harry Marton it is yet too early to say. No doubt we shall find out in due course. Meanwhile, try to keep an eye on Sarda without letting him know you are watching him, but bearing in mind that he is prob-ably watching us, too.'

Between them they folded back the rickety doors of the hangar and pulled the machine outside, with its nose pointing to the open aerodrome. Biggles, with Ginger dose behind, opened the door of the

machine and walked through to the cockpit, and with his left hand resting lightly on the back of the seat, he reached forward with the other to turn on the petrol cock. As he did so he happened to glance down. The next instant he had spun round, almost knocking Ginger over in his haste. 'Outside for your lifer he hissed tensely.

Ginger took one amazed look at Biggles's face; the expression of it made him catch his breath, but he was too well trained to waste time asking ques-tions. Without a word he whipped round, darted to the door and leapt to the ground.

Biggles landed almost on his heels. 'Run,' he yelled at Algy, who was staring at this astonishing behaviour in bewilderment. 'Make for the rest-house,' he went on, desperately, 'and don't stop on the way.'

With one accord they made a wild rush in the direction of the rest-house.

'What the dickens is it ?' cried Algy in something between fright and anger.

'Don't talk—run,' panted Biggles, snatching a glance over his shoulder. 'Faster,' he yelled, his voice rising to a frenzied cry of panic.

His fear communicated itself to Ginger, who sprinted for dear life ; but with Algy curiosity

overcame all other emotions and he took a quick look behind. Twenty yards away what appeared to be a short length of black hosepipe was covering the ground at incredible speed in a series of galvanized jerks, and it told him all he needed to know. With his elbows pressed against his ribs, he shot forward like a sprinter leaving the starting line, while a gap of real terror burst from his lips.

They reached the rest-house about half a dozen yards ahead of their pursuer, and Biggles, who was in last, slammed the door behind him. 'On the table,' he roared, glancing at the base of the walls, which he now noticed for the first time had been undermined in several places by rodents and storm water.

It was touch and go. For a moment it looked as if the table would collapse and throw them into a heap on the floor, but they recovered their balance just as the snake, twisting and curling like a whip-thong, shot through a hole near the door.

There was a roar as Algy's gun blazed, but the target was a difficult one, and the bullet only sent up a shower of earth, which served to drive the reptile to greater fury. Biggles snatched up a wooden case from the pile on the table. It weighed about twenty pounds and was marked 'corned beef'. For



**They reached the rest-house about half a dozen yards ahead  
of their pursuer**

a moment he held it poised, and then brought it crashing down on the snake, now almost at the foot of one of the table legs. It curled back upon itself furiously, but uselessly, for its back was broken, although the ends which projected from under the box continued to writhe convulsively. Biggles took the revolver from Algy's hand, and leaning down, fired three shots at point-blank range at the squat black head. The third shot shattered it to pulp, and the threshing became a slow sinuous movement. Then he jumped down, not very steadily, and

stood staring at it. 'Well,' he said in a curious voice, 'now we know where we are.'

What is it?' asked Ginger in a strained whisper.

'I'm not quite sure, because I've never seen one before, but I think it 's a mamba,' replied Biggles quietly. 'Did you ever see anything go so fast in your life ?'

'Is it poisonous ?' asked Algy, getting off the table.

Biggles felt in his pocket and took out a small, thin book. 'This is a handbook on Africa issued by the Zoological Society,' he said. 'I thought it might be useful.' Swiftly he flicked through the pages. 'Here we are,' he went on. ' "Mamba. Two species; green and black. The black mamba

is one of the deadliest snakes in the world, and one of the few that will attack a human being without provocation. It is extremely venomous and can travel at great speed. It has been known to catch a fast runner and, it has been said, can catch a man on horseback, although this is regarded as doubtful. It can only travel slowly uphill, however, and natives, when pursued, always seek to escape by making for a gradient if one is available." '

'Very pretty,' observed Algy grimly. 'I'll take a gradient about with me while I'm in Africa. What did you mean when you said that now we know where we are ?'

'How do you suppose that thing got into the cockpit ?'

'It must have crawled in.'

'Crawled in, my foot! Nothing is going to make me believe that a snake can open doors, go through, and then close them again behind it.'

Algy whistled softly. 'Of course,' he said. 'The machine was all shut up, wasn't it?'

'It was; doors, windows, and windscreen. I took particular care to shut everything up tightly in order to keep dust and insects out.'

'Then it looks as if somebody must have put it in.'

'Your powers of deduction are improving.'

`But who would do a thing like that, and why ?'

`Somebody who wants us out of the way, but is cunning enough to try to make cold-blooded murder look like an accident,' answered Biggles coldly. 'Can you imagine what would have happened if we had taken off with that horror in the cockpit? I can—easily.'

It would just have been another of those mysterious crashes that defy explanation. No doubt the hyenas and jackals would have removed any traces of snake-bite. Ssh! Here comes Sarda—leave this to me.' He raised a warning finger as a soft footfall was heard outside. The door opened and Sarda stood on the threshold, looking inquiringly from one to the other of the three airmen.

'I heard shooting, huh ?' he said. Then, following Biggles's eyes, he looked down and saw the crushed reptile. 'À!' he exclaimed, sibilantly.

`That 's a mamba, isn't it ?' asked Biggles carelessly.

`Yaas-him mamba. Very dangerous,' answered the half-breed.

'Many of them about these parts ?' inquired Biggles.

`Yaas—many.'

'Well, that's how we treat them,' murmured Biggles, looking Sarda straight in the face.

`You may not always be so lucky,' replied Sarda thoughtfully, picking up the dead reptile by the tail and throwing it out on to the aerodrome. 'You were just going to fly, huh ?' he queried.

'Yes, and we're still going to,' Biggles told him shortly. 'Come on, chaps, don't let's waste any more time.'

`We'd better have a debate about this after you get back,' declared Algy as Biggles got into the machine and Sarda walked back to the bungalow.

Biggles nodded. 'Yes,' he agreed. 'One thing is certain: we shall have to mount a guard over the machine or it will take more nerve than I've got to get into it. I don't mind the ordinary risks of flying, but I'm no snake-charmer--or lion-tamer. Are you O.K. Ginger?'

'O.K., Chief.'

‘Right-ho. Cheerio, Algy, see you presently.’

Biggles twirled the self-starter and, as the engine roared, taxied slowly out across the aerodrome into position for a take-off.

Five minutes later they were in the air, circling for height, with the vast African continent stretching away on all sides, harsh, forbidding, mysterious.

Far to the north a cloud of yellow smoke marked the position of a bush fire, a common enough sight in Africa where native tribes employ this method of driving game towards their traps. To the west, a range of mountains, their blue serrated peaks softened by distance, rose above a bank of heat-haze that was now beginning to form.

‘I’m going to try the south first,’ declared Biggles to Ginger, who was sitting beside him, gazing around with absorbed interest. ‘It’s almost certain that Marton started for Juba, whatever may have happened afterwards to make him change his course,’ he concluded.

For an hour they flew on, watching the ground closely on each side for any signs of a crash, but in vain. Automatically they also kept a watchful eye open for prominent landmarks, and although they picked out one or two, salient features were few and far between. For the most part the landscape was wearisome in its monotony. Wild animals they saw in large numbers, giraffe, buffalo and deer, and occasionally a solitary lion.

Once they saw a small herd of elephants standing flank deep in a lake by a forest of considerable dimensions.

‘We’d better be getting back,’ murmured Biggles at last, and suiting the action to the word brought

the nose of the Dragon round until it was pointing to the north. ‘I’ve learnt something, anyway,’ he added as an afterthought.

‘What’s that?’

‘The size of the task we’ve taken on. It’s all very well to sit at home and look at maps, but when you get out here and see this—he indicated the vast territory below with a wave of his left hand—one begins to get an idea of what one is faced with. And I don’t mind telling you that it gives me a sort of hopeless feeling.’

Ginger said nothing, possibly because he shared Biggles’s pessimism.

Nor did they speak again until the aerodrome came into sight and they were gliding down towards it.

'What the dickens does Algy think he's playing at ?' asked Biggles, as he flattened out and landed.

Ginger peered forward through the windscreen and saw Algy standing just inside the hangar making strange but definite signals to them. 'I fancy he 's got something to tell us,'

he said slowly. 'If I were you I'd taxi right up to the shed.'

This apparently was what Algy was trying to induce them to do, for he remained in the shed, beckoning them on, without making any attempt to meet them.

'Has the sun given you St. Vitus's dance or something?' inquired Biggles, opening the windscreen and looking down.

'No! Come on out; I've got something to tell you,' was the impatient answer.

'Well, what is it?' asked Biggles a moment later, as he jumped lightly to the ground.

'There 's some one else in the bungalow besides Sarda.'

Biggles pursed his lips. 'How do you know ?' he asked quickly.

'I heard Sarda talking to him. Shouting might almost be a better word.'

'How long ago?'

'It's happened twice. Once, immediately after you had taken off, and again just now. I may be wrong but I fancy he didn't know I was in here. He thought we'd all gone off together.'

'What makes you think that ?'

'Because as the machine took off he dashed out and looked up at it; then, as soon as you were well away, he ran back without even glancing in this direction and started shouting at somebody. I was so surprised that I stayed here in the hope of learning something else, instead of letting him see me as he would have done if I had gone back to the rest-house to make the coffee.'

'Very interesting. Is the other fellow still in there, do you think ?'



I'm certain of it. I've kept my eyes on the place all the time.'

'Good! Ginger, watch the bungalow until further orders,' commanded Biggles; and as Ginger jumped to obey he turned again to Algy. 'By fair means or foul we've got to find out who it is,' he declared.

'Why not go to the place openly ?'

'Because I'm afraid that if there is any one there he won't let us in, and we couldn't force our way in without an open declaration of war. Still, there may be no harm in trying.

Come on, let's go. Leave the talking to me.'

Side by side they walked down to the bungalow. Sarda must have seen them coming, for he opened the door and stepped on to the threshold as they reached it.

'Phew! It's warm,' muttered Biggles, truthfully enough. 'May we come in ?'

'Yaas. With pleasure. Why not?' was the prompt reply.

Biggles concealed his surprise at this invitation, and threw a quick glance round the room into

which the front door gave access, but except for the fact that it was in a filthy condition there was nothing unusual about it. Indeed, it was pretty much as a stranger would expect to find it. 'Not a very big place to have to spend your life in, is it ?' he murmured sympathetically, with his eyes on Sarda's face.

'Plenty big enough for me,' the aerodrome manager assured him. 'Another big room here.

'He opened a communicating door and showed them an adjoining room which, in a primitive sort of way, was furnished as a bedroom.

'These are all the rooms you have, aren't they ?' asked Biggles, making a quick mental calculation of the overall dimensions of the place.

All except the kitchen. Kitchen 's over there.' Sarda pointed to a small door on the opposite side of the living room.

Biggles strolled over and opened it. As Sarda had said, the room into which it led was a small kitchen. But there was no one in it.

`Well, well,' he said smiling, 'you're better off than we are in the rest-house. What we really came down for was to ask you if you'd care to have two or three tins of preserved fruit; we've got quite a large stock.'

`Thanks,' answered Sarda with alacrity.

`Come across and collect them when you have time,' Biggles told him, and with a cheerful wave of farewell, led the way back to their quarters. Inside the rest-house Algy gave full rein to his astonishment. 'Well, I'm dashed,' he muttered. 'If that doesn't beat the band. I'd have bet my life some one was in there.'

'It's time you knew that betting is called a mug's game,' smiled Biggles.

'I had a good look round and there wasn't an inch of space unaccounted for,' said Ginger.

`Quite right,' agreed Biggles. 'Sarda is the only man in that house.'

'In which case he must have been talking to himself.'

`Not necessarily.'

Algy started. 'You mean that he was talking to somebody?'

Biggles nodded.

`Who?'

'Ah I That's what we've got to find out.' 'But where has the other fellow gone?'

'He was never there.'

'Are you trying to be funny?'

Tar from it. Mr. Sarda was speaking to

somebody, but the person with whom he was conversing might be anywhere in Africa.'

'You mean

'He was talking on the telephone.'

'Great heavens! I never thought of that. But I didn't see a telephone.'

`Neither did I, but I saw the wire.'

`Here he comes now,' put in Ginger quickly.

Biggles made one of those quick decisions that had been responsible for much of his success in the past. 'Look, Ginger,' he said tersely, 'slip across to the hangar. As soon as you see Sarda come in here, nip down to the bungalow, find the telephone receiver by following the lead-in wire, and, if you can, pick it up and see if you can get on to anybody without giving yourself away. Jump to it; we might find it difficult to keep Sarda here for very long.'

Ginger went out as Sarda came in, and Biggles selected from the stores the tins of preserved fruit that he had promised him.

Àh! Here you are,' he said. Then, as a thought struck him, he added, 'Have a drink?'

An unpleasant smile spread over Sarda's face. `Yaas,' he said.

Ì can't let you have much,' apologized Biggles,

`because we don't carry liquor in the ordinary sense of the word—just a bottle of brandy for medicinal purposes in case of accident; still, I don't suppose it will taste any the worse for that. Where the dickens did you put that bottle, Algy ?' he went on, making a long business of finding it, and then polishing a glass carefully before pouring a small measure of the spirit into it. Anything to gain time.

`Did you find a new landing-ground this morning, huh ?' asked the half-caste, sipping with relish the brandy that Algy had passed over to him.

Biggles shook his head. `No ; I'm afraid it 's going to be a big job,' he replied. 'I think it would be a better proposition if a little more money was spent on this place, which would mean better business for you, eh ?'

Sarda looked doubtful.

Ìnsula wouldn't be a very popular place, of course, if you are going to allow mambas and things to crawl about people's machines,' went on Biggles good humouredly, with the object of putting to rest in Sarda's mind any idea that they suspected him of being concerned with the snake incident.

The half-caste laughed boisterously. 'You bet,'

he said ambiguously, putting down the now empty glass. 'You flying again to-day, huh?'

Biggles nodded. 'Yes, we shall make another flight presently,' he answered. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ginger bolt out of the bungalow and run towards the hangar, so he knew there was no point in delaying Sarda any longer. 'Well, well, we'll be seeing you sometimes,' he smiled.

The aerodrome manager picked up the tins that Biggles had given him. 'Maas,' he said again, noncommittally, and with a nod of thanks left them.

'That fellow's "yaas" gets monotonous,' muttered Algy after he had gone.

It does rather, but no doubt his English vocabulary is a bit limited. But unless I'm mistaken, it will be when he starts saying "no" that the fun will begin. But here comes Ginger. My goodness, the lad's pale. He's discovered something, judging by the look on his face.'

Ginger burst into the rest-house, but stopped short just inside the door, staring at the others.

'Well ?' asked Biggles shortly. 'Have you got cramp in your tongue ?'

Ginger nodded. 'I have had,' he answered grimly. 'I found that 'phone: it's in a little box in the kitchen. I took it out, put it to my ear, and wound up the thing like a self-starter. After a minute a voice said "Hello", but it sounded a long way away. I said "Hello". Then a voice said, "You're English? For God's sake help me". I said "Who are you ?" Then he told me his name.' Ginger stopped, unconsciously dramatic.

Biggles eyed him coldly. 'Keep going,' he said. 'What was the name ?'

Ginger tossed his hat on to the table. 'Harry Marton,' he said simply.

## CHAPTER IV

### SINISTER DEVELOPMENTS

THERE was a profound silence which lasted for some seconds after Ginger had made his momentous announcement.

Biggles was the first to speak. 'Well, well,' he said in a quiet voice, while a curious smile spread slowly over his face. It did not express humour so much as comical surprise. 'This is a development that I did not expect,' he added whimsically.

Algy merely continued to stare at Ginger as if he could not believe his ears. 'Well, it's something to know young Marton is still alive,' he observed presently in a tense voice.

Biggles hoisted himself on to a corner of the table and rubbed his chin reflectively. `

What's going on here, I wonder ?' he murmured. 'This has sort of taken the wind out of my sails with a vengeance. We shall have to readjust our ideas, that's certain. What earthly reason could any one have for kidnapping a perfectly harmless lad like Harry Marton ? If any one can tell me the answer to that I should be very glad.'

`Maybe somebody wanted his machine,' suggested Ginger.

Biggles looked at him thoughtfully. 'There 's something in that,' he said seriously. 'But why not get rid of him altogether instead of leaving him alive, perhaps to bear witness one day against the thief, or thieves? He is certain to get away if ever he gets a chance.'

Ì think we may assume that the people who are holding him are not likely to give him a chance,' ventured Algy grimly. 'I should say myself that he had either seen something, or heard something, that he shouldn't have seen or heard, and that's why they've collared him.'

Biggles nodded. 'Well, it's not much use sitting here guessing; we'd better start and do something about it.'

Àre you going to let old man Marton know that the boy 's alive ?' inquired Algy.

`No, I don't think so,' replied Biggles, drumming on the table with his fingers. 'We don't know what's behind this, and if a spy lets the people we are up against know what we know now, we may be the means of causing the boy's death. It would be a ghastly thing to raise the old man's hopes only to dash them down again. I think we'd better keep our knowledge to ourselves for the present. Obviously the first thing we've got to do is to find out

the direction in which that telephone of Sarda's leads, in order to get an idea of where the other end of it is. When we know that I fancy our

troubles will begin in earnest.'

'Why take the risk? Why not let the authorities know the truth so that they can handle the affair? They've a better chance of clearing things up than we have.'

And a better chance of putting the tin hat on the whole thing. One of the troubles of a service is that it can't move without people knowing. It would be fatal to let the world know that Harry Marton is alive, and we should have to reveal that fact before the authorities would help us. After that anything might happen, but Marton would disappear for ever and we should just look a trio of fools.'

'Well, what's our first move to be?' asked Ginger impatiently.

Biggles did not answer for a minute or two. 'I think the first thing should be to get on friendly terms with Sarda and allay any suspicions that we may have aroused in his mind.

I only hope that Marton hasn't given the game away at his end of the line. It's a pity we don't know the direction of it or we could do a bit of exploring from up topsides. We don't know that yet, but I hope we shall soon find out. Meanwhile, I think it might be a good plan to pretend to leave the place for a time, in which case Sarda might make a move that would tell us something. I say "pretend" because I should remain concealed in the hangar to watch what happened after the machine was out of the way.

You can take her off and cruise around, keeping out of earshot. You might spot something, but I don't think you will, because the other end of that telephone must be a long way away or it wouldn't be necessary to have a telephone at all. Come on, let's be going.'

Within a quarter of an hour the Dragon's engines were ticking over just in front of the hangar, a position from which only the front part of it was visible from the bungalow.

Then, all wearing flying kit, they made a business of getting aboard; but when the machine took off Biggles was sitting on an empty oil drum at the back of the hangar.

Within five minutes of the machine leaving the ground Sarda emerged from the bungalow and walked towards the hangar in a manner that left no doubt but that he had a definite object in view. Niggles saw him coming and looked around quickly for a place of concealment. There was none, but

a pile of old sacking lying in a corner—kept, so Sarda had told them, for covering engines when the wind was raising a dust—offered possibilities. Holding his breath, for the pile looked a likely home for crawling things of all sorts, Biggles lay down beside the sacks and pulled them over him. Almost at once he heard the soft pad of Sarda's footsteps. There was silence for a moment; then he heard them receding. After a cautious peep to make sure that the coast was clear, he lost no time in evacuating his undesirable nest, and shaking himself violently to dislodge the ants that were already indicating their disapproval at being disturbed, he dashed across to the flimsy wall and peered through a crack just in time to see Sarda go back into the bungalow. He waited, fully expecting to see him come out again, but that evidently was not the half-breed's intention.

Then began an interminable wait which caused Biggles to wish fervently that he had decided on some other plan, for what with the heat, which was almost unendurable, and the flies, which kept up a vicious and continuous attack on all exposed parts of his person, he was driven nearly to distraction. Torn between discarding his clothes on account of the heat, and muffling himself up in his flying kit as protection against the insects, he could only pace up and down, stopping every few seconds to glance at the bungalow. Leave the hangar he dare not for fear Sarda should see him, in which case the half-breed's suspicions would certainly be increased rather than allayed.

An hour and a half passed in this way, and just as Biggles had reached the point when he felt that whatever the cost might be he must rush out into the open or go mad, he heard a sound that set his blood tingling and caused his troubles to recede to insignificance. It was the sound of an aero engine, a single engine, ever increasing in volume, and before he had time to conjecture who the stranger might be a black-painted Puss Moth had swept low over the hangar and landed in the middle of the aerodrome. Swinging round almost in its own length, it then taxied tail up in the direction of the rest-house, towards which Sarda was now walking briskly.

From his hiding-place Biggles saw the door of the cabin open, and a short, stockily built man step out on to the baked earth; he beckoned impatiently to the half-caste, who broke into a run and joined him near the door of the rest-house, where a swift altercation took place. It was only

of short duration, but from it Biggles learned two things. The first was that the new-comer was a foreigner; and the second, that he was

either Sarda's employer or superior officer. That he was not English was revealed clearly by the way he waved his hands when talking; and that Sarda was his employee was made obvious by the half-caste's servile manner. Indeed, his servility was not far short of abject fear. So much Biggles was able to surmise within a minute of time. That the stranger did not intend staying long was also suggested by the fact that he left his machine out in the broiling sun with the engine ticking over; so Biggles was disagreeably surprised when, instead of getting back into his machine at the end of the conversation, the Puss Moth pilot strode into the rest-house, closely followed by Sarda.

Biggles bit his lip, for this was something he had not foreseen. In the rest-house were their belongings—papers and miscellaneous kit that were too bulky to be carried about in their pockets—and the last thing he wanted was their inspection by the lessees of Insula aerodrome. Even although it meant disclosing himself, he knew he must prevent that, for amongst his papers were letters from Mr. Marton.

Swiftly, and without any attempt at concealment, he walked towards the rest-house. As he approached it the voices of the occupants, speaking in broken English, reached him clearly, and he slowed down to listen. 'Here it is,' the new-corner was saying. 'Do what I tell you and we shall have no more trouble. Nuzzing could be more simple.'

'But—' began Sarda, but the stranger interrupted him. 'Say no more,' he said shortly. '

Leave all ze rest to us; we make ze finish.'

Then fell a silence that Biggles could not understand, so he walked quickly to the open door and looked in. One glance was enough. The pilot, clad only in a thin sweater, shorts, shoes and stockings, was opening Biggles's log-book, which he had just taken from the kit-bag that lay open at his feet. Sarda, with a white envelope in his hand, was watching him closely. Neither of them saw Biggles standing in the doorway, and the announcement of his arrival was dramatic.

'Tan I help you ?' he said quietly.

At the words, both Sarda and the stranger leapt round as if a gun had been fired. Sarda's hand flew to his shirt and the stranger's went to his hip pocket. In that position they remained, while

Biggles eyed them coldly. 'I said, can I help you?' he repeated.

A queer expression crossed the stranger's face, while Sarda simply



stared at him as if waiting for a lead. Presently it came.

`Hal Why zere you are,' cried the pilot effusively, removing his hand from his pocket. '

Zis fool 'ere'—he indicated Sarda—`told me you were in ze air.'

Ì changed my mind,' answered Biggles calmly. `Have you finished with my log-book ?

If so, I'll put it back.'

The other smiled apologetically. 'I vas just interest to know who come to zis part of ze world,' he explained with an expressive shrug of his shoulders.

`Well, I can tell you all about it,' replied Biggles suavely. 'Sorry I can't offer you a drink.

My name is Bigglesworth.'

'Mine is . . . Leroux—Leon Leroux.'

Biggles knew from the momentary hesitation that the man was lying, but he did not let him see it. 'What are you doing in this part of the world, anyway ?' he asked coolly.

Òh, I fly for Stampoulos et Cie, of Cairo. They have tobacco plantations near.'



At the words, both Sarda and the stranger leapt round as if a gun  
had been fired

`Where?'

Over zare.' The other waved his hand vaguely. `You're French, aren't  
you ?'

`Yes.'

`Prefer to fly a British machine, though, eh ?' `My firm buy ze

aeroplane, not me,'

answered the Frenchman quickly.

'That's a mistake,' smiled Biggles. 'I wouldn't work for a firm who didn't allow me to choose my equipment. But that's neither here nor there. If you leave your machine out in the sun much longer the dope will be blistered off it.'

The other walked towards the door. 'Yes,' he said, and then hesitated. 'You are ver interested in zis aerodrome, is it not ?' he inquired, eyeing Biggles shrewdly.

'More or less. We've been asked to have a look round,' answered Biggles casually.

'It is a bad place. Ze fever--'

'Yes, I know,' interrupted Biggles smiling. 'I've heard all about it from Sarda. Still, we shan't be here long,' he added.

'No, you will not be here long,' agreed the other slowly, in an expressionless voice, as he walked towards his machine.

Biggles followed him out, wondering what he

was really thinking, for the formal conversation had meant nothing, and he was well aware of it. His eyes ran quickly over the machine as Leroux got into his seat. Then he stepped back out of the slipstream as the engine roared, and waved his hand as the machine raced across the barren earth and into the air.

He turned to find Sarda watching him narrowly. 'I suppose Mr. Leroux often comes here

?' he observed, hoping to lead him into conversation.

But Sarda was not to be drawn. 'He my boss,' he said in a surly voice, and turning on his heel, walked quickly towards the bungalow.

Biggles retired to the rest-house and sat down to contemplate the situation. He was still sitting there deep in thought when, twenty minutes later, the Dragon landed and the others joined him.

'Well, have you discovered anything ?' he asked.

Algy shook his head. 'Nothing,' he answered laconically. 'Have you ?'

`Yes,' replied Biggles.

Algy started, and Ginger's eyes whipped round to his chief. 'What is it ?' they both asked together.

`While you've been away a machine has landed here, a Puss Moth belonging to the Stampoulos Company—the people we're up against. The pilot,

with whom I had a short conversation, told me his name was Leroux, but unless I am mistaken, he is Jean Lazarre, who lost his job with the Aeropostale people a few years ago for being drunk on duty. I've never seen him in the flesh, but I remember seeing his photo in the French paper L'Aile, when he was reckoned to be one of the best civil pilots in France. What happened to him afterwards I never heard, but he is here now, doing the sort of job one would expect a man of his sort to be on.'

Ànything else ?' asked Algy.

Biggles lit a cigarette and put his heel on the match. 'Yes,' he said. 'As I told you, Leroux—we'd better call him that for the time being—is flying a Puss. It is painted black, but here and there where the paint has peeled off one can see another colour underneath; and that colour is—'

`Red,' muttered Ginger succinctly.

Biggles smiled. 'For one of such tender years your perspicacity approaches the abnormal,'

he observed approvingly.

There was silence for a few moments. 'And what now ?' asked Algy, opening a bottle of soda water.

Às you rightly remark, what now ?' murmured Biggles. 'Things are moving fast—

almost too fast.

We shall skid if we aren't careful. I caught Leroux in here going through my log-book.

He has given something to Sarda, something to do with us, I believe, but I don't know what it is. Leroux suspects that we are what we really are, that's certain, but how much lie actually knows about us is more than I can say. I fancy Sarda told him over the telephone that the machine had gone off, so he took the opportunity of slipping over to have a word with him and give him some instructions. We've got to watch out.'

'Which way did Leroux go when he took off?' 'Due east.'

'Which means that his head-quarters are somewhere in that direction.'

'You may be right, but I fancy it is more likely to mean that the plantation—or whatever it is—lies to the west. That is, unless Leroux is a bigger fool than I take him to be. Even before he took off I made a mental note that he would choose a line of flight other than the one he is most concerned with.'

'What can we do to confirm it?'

'Nothing at present, but as soon as it is dark I propose to find out the direction in which our objective lies.'

'How?'

'By seeing which way the telephone wire goes. That 's bound to go straight to it, because when it was set up there was surely no need to lay a false trail. So unless any one has a better plan, what I suggest is this. As soon as it is dark I am going down to the back of the bungalow to find out where the telephone lead emerges, and then follow it for a distance—that is, assuming it is an overhead wire, as I expect it will be. You'd better come with me, Algy, to keep cave. Ginger will have to stay in the hangar while we're away to guard the machine. With Sarda prowling about I don't think it would be wise to leave it even for a moment. We don't want to get in it to-morrow and then find that a longeron has been sawn through, or a turnbuckle unscrewed.'

'No, you're right there,' declared Algy emphatically.

'Good! Then if that's settled a bite of lunch won't do us any harm.'

The remainder of the day passed slowly, though rather than waste time they employed themselves by refuelling the machine and giving it a top overhaul. But the heat and the flies were trying, and they were all glad when the sun sank behind the distant hills and darkness fell.

There was no moon, but one by one the stars came out and glowed against a background of sky that was like purple velvet.

'Well, I think it's dark enough to be moving,' announced Biggles, when he was satisfied that it was safe to act. 'You know what you are to do, Ginger? Whatever happens, don't leave the machine. If Sarda starts monkeying around, stop him; we shan't be far away—

not out of earshot, anyway.'

'Good enough, Chief,' answered Ginger firmly. 'Can I take one of the rifles ?'

'You may, but be careful what you're up to. Don't shoot me or Algy if we happen to walk in unexpectedly.'

'I'll try not to,' promised Ginger, smiling. 'I don't mind Sarda, but the idea of things creeping about gives me the pins and needles down the back.'

'Never mind the pins and needles: you look after that machine,' Biggles told him as, with Algy by his side, he set off on a detour that would bring them to the rear of the bungalow, from the window of which a shaft of yellow light told them that Sarda was at home.

Neither of them was accustomed to night work in a country where wild beasts roamed at large; it called for an entirely different form of mental strength from flying, and more than once they stopped and strained their eyes in the gloom when a slight sound suggested that they were not alone in the coppice. They saw nothing, however, but it took them a good deal longer to reach their objective than they had allowed for. Further, the business of finding the telephone lead in the darkness—for with the windows of the bungalow blind-less, they dare not risk striking a match—was more difficult than they expected. In the end they found it, but by that time Biggles's watch told him that they had been away for nearly two hours.

'We shall have to move faster than this or we shall be out all night,' he breathed as, feeling along the wire with his hand, he followed it to an insulator on a tree some ten or twelve yards away from the house.

Thereafter there was no great difficulty in following the wire, but it was slow work.

Once they nearly stampeded as a dark form sprang up just in front of

them and dashed away into the darkness.

`We ought to have brought rifles with us,'

growled Algy as he stood staring wildly in the direction in which the beast had disappeared. Automatics are about as much use as pea-shooters in this sort of place.

What do you suppose that was ?'

Ì haven't the remotest idea,' answered Biggles irritably. 'It might have been anything except an elephant, and it wasn't big enough for that. Where's that confounded wire ?'

It took them some minutes to find it again, but shortly afterwards it emerged from the coppice into the open plain where, supported at intervals by bamboo poles sunk into the ground, it went in a straight line for as far as they could see. The direction, as Biggles pointed out with a nudge at Algy, was due west.

They followed it for a little way, but the direction remained constant, and at last Biggles stopped. 'Ì don't think there is any point in following it farther,' he said. 'If we fly on a compass course due west, sooner or later we shall find what we're looking for.'

`Could we see the wire from the air, do you think, if we flew low ?' asked Algy.

Ì doubt it,' replied Biggles. 'That is, not unless we flew very low, which might be a bit risky in this

sort of country. In the early morning, while the sun is at an angle, we might see the shadows of the poles on the ground, but in the middle of the day, with the sun slap overhead, there wouldn't be any shadows. Anyway, I don't think we need worry about that. If we fly west, and fly high, we shall be able to see at least fifty or sixty miles in all directions in this atmosphere, and—hark!'

Both Biggles and Algy sprang round as the silence was broken suddenly by an unmistakable noise. It was the soft, rhythmic purr of aero engines ticking over.

`Great heaven! That's the Dragon,' gasped Algy.

'I didn't think it was a buffalo,' rasped Biggles. `What does that young fool think he's up to, I wonder ?'

Even then it did not occur to either of them that the machine was preparing to take off.

`He'll fetch Sarda out to see what's going on, the young ass,' began Algy. He got no farther, but clutched Biggles's arm as, with a deafening roar, the engines broke into full song. For a moment or two the noise receded, then it increased again to earsplitting force as it swept towards them. Staring up, they could just make out the dark silhouette of

the machine as it raced low across the sky on a westerly course.

As the sound faded away Biggles pulled his paralysed faculties together. 'Come on,' he cried; and regardless of Sarda, wild beasts, or anything else, he sprinted for dear life towards the hangar.

Ducking under branches and jumping over obstacles, Algy followed until, panting and dishevelled, they dashed into the empty shed.

`Ginger,' cried Biggles sharply.

There was no reply.

With trembling fingers Biggles struck a match and looked around the floor, afraid of what he might find. His eyes fell on a rifle lying in the dust; it was one of their own, and he glanced at Algy with a peculiar expression on his face. Then, as the match went out, he drew a deep breath. `Well,' he said, in a hopeless sort of voice, `that's that. I can't say I blame myself or any one else; it's hard for any one to make allowances for this sort of thing. We'd better go down to the rest-house and talk it over.'

In the gaping doorway of the hangar they met Sarda, lantern in hand.

`What is happening here ?' he asked with studied politeness. 'Did I hear an aeroplane—

huh?'

At last, with his brain aching from the con. temption of so many vital problems, he leaned back with a sigh of weariness and prepared to wait for the dawn.

## CHAPTER VI

### SARDA STRIKES



AFTER the first shock occasioned by the disappearance of the Dragon had passed off, Biggles's reasoning ability quickly returned to normal. Taking an electric torch, he went back with Algy to the hangar and made a thorough examination of the place, both inside and out, Algy assisting him in the search. They found nothing more, of course, for the simple reason that there was nothing more to be found, but Biggles was able to reconstruct the scene fairly accurately.

'Ginger was sitting over there on the oil drum when the business started,' he observed half to himself. 'Leroux then came in and went to the machine.'

Algy started. 'You think Leroux did it ?'

'Who else ? Ginger was hardly likely to take the machine off himself, and the chances against any other pilot but Leroux being in the district must be pretty remote. As I say, some one, who for the sake of argument we will assume was Leroux, got into the machine, or attempted to do something to it ; whereupon Ginger came across to see what was

Oh, no; it was just the breeze sighing through the trees,' sneered Biggles sarcastically. '

Come on, Algy.'

Without another word they set off towards the rest-house.

## CHAPTER V

### ALONE WITH A LION

GINGER had been by no means happy when he left the others to take up his position of guard over the Dragon. He was not exactly afraid, but the idea of remaining alone, in the dark, in a building that would not have kept out a determined sheep, in the heart of lion-infested country, gave him—to use his own expression—pins and needles down the back. Nevertheless, it did not occur to him to quibble at his allotted task.

On reaching the hangar his first act was to go into the machine and unlock the armament chest with the key he had obtained from Biggles. From it he selected an Express rifle and a clip of ammunition. Then he relocked the chest, put the key in his pocket, loaded the weapon, and with it resting across his knees, took up a position on an oil-drum at the rear of the building from which it was possible to command a

view of the whole machine, the dark bulk of which he could just distinguish in the gloom.

For a time all was silent, but the minutes passed slowly. Once a lion roared in the far distance,

and the sound did nothing to make him feel happier. Later, strange noises began to occur; soft rustlings and unexplainable whispering sounds. What caused these he did not know, but as they were obviously animal and not human, he did not investigate. Once, too, he distinctly heard the faint swish of wings over his head, and looking up fearfully, with eyes now accustomed to the darkness, he could just make out the form of a huge bat that circled the hangar thrice before disappearing as mysteriously as it had arrived.

In such circumstances he had not the slightest fear of going to sleep, but in this he was mistaken, for as the night wore on, although he certainly did not sleep, he was by no means wide awake when a fresh sound brought every nerve in his body with a rush to the alert. Somewhere, not far away, a dry twig had snapped. Obviously, only a weight could have caused the twig to break, and he was well aware of it, although at the moment just what shape the weight in question took he had no means of knowing. He was not kept long in suspense. There came a soft footfall, a muttered word, and then a harsh, crackling noise. A wide slit of star-studded sky appeared, and he knew that one of the rush-plaited doors of the hangar had been opened.

No longer was he in any doubt as to the character of the visitors. Animals might break twigs, but they did not open doors.

Leaving his seat, he crept stealthily as far back in the hangar as possible, both in order to prevent his face being seen and in the hope that he might see something of the visitors who, until then, had been just outside his field of view on account of the machine. He saw them at once. It was too dark for faces to be recognized, but by his outstanding physique he could see that one was Sarda ; the other was a short, stoutish man whom he had never seen before.

Quietly and deliberately they opened the hangar doors wide, and then stood talking in whispers just inside.

Now Ginger was in what is commonly called a quandary. Should he challenge them, at the same time calling aloud for Biggles, or should he wait to see what they proposed to do? That was the problem with which he was faced. As he reasoned it out, he decided that if the men

were on legitimate business, which admittedly seemed unlikely, his presence in the hangar and his actions would make it clear to them that something in the nature of a trap had been set. In any case, if he shouted for help, and the others came to his assistance, what could they say? What could they do? No doubt the intruders would soon find a feasible excuse for being there—anyway, Sarda, who, after all, as aerodrome manager had even more right there than he, Ginger, had. So he decided that the only thing he could do was to let them commit themselves by some act of sabotage, if such was their intention, before he disclosed his presence.

It was quite a sensible course to adopt, but he was utterly unprepared for what was to follow. Not when Sarda turned and walked away towards the bungalow did he suspect it; nor even when the stranger opened the door of the machine and got inside. When he heard the whirr of the self-starter the explanation struck him like a blow, but by that time the engines had come to life and the propellers were filling the hangar with a dust-laden whirlwind.

Now, only those who have stood immediately behind the revolving propellers of an aeroplane on a dusty aerodrome have any idea of just what the effect can be. Ginger was literally blinded—temporarily, of course. To open his eyes was a physical impossibility, so he could only grope his way to the machine. His questing hands found the tail, and worked their way along the fuselage until they came to the door. It was shut. By the time he got it open the machine was moving forward, slowly, but with swiftly increasing speed, and as the full desperation of the situation struck him he acted in a sort of frenzy of consternation. He dropped the rifle, for it only impeded him, and flung himself through the doorway. He was round in an instant, and although he was still unable to see, he managed to close the door behind him. Then he sank down and put his hands over his eyes, for the pain in them was intense.

It was two or three minutes before he could see reasonably well, and by that time the machine was in the air, banking steeply as the pilot turned. 'I suppose I ought to be thankful that I'm inside,' he thought, as he rose to his feet and blinked forwards towards the cockpit, where he could just see the vague outline of the pilot, clearly unaware of his presence, silhouetted against the glow of the luminous instrument board. Feeling in his pocket he took out his automatic. Then, with a sudden feeling of helplessness, he sat down again, for he perceived that although he held all the advantages of surprise attack—perhaps the most vital element in fighting of any sort—he was by no means master

of the situation. To attempt to hold up Leroux—for such he assumed the pilot to be—at the point of a gun must be a palpable bluff, and the Frenchman, when confronted, could hardly fail to realize it. It would be no use telling him to go back and land. However much he, Ginger, might threaten, the man could ignore him with impunity, knowing perfectly well that he dare not use his weapon even if he was capable of shooting an unarmed man at point-blank range, for during the interval that must inevitably elapse while he was removing the body in order to get to the controls, the machine would fall out of control and crash. Added to this, there was always the risk of the body falling across the joystick and jamming it.

The more Ginger thought about it the more awkward the situation appeared. He had enough common sense to see that by revealing himself he automatically reduced by a considerable margin his chance of success in any plan he might formulate. So in the end he did nothing, but resolved to preserve his advantage of surprise until the machine was on the ground, when it could be employed with telling effect.

He had barely reached this decision when, to his astonishment, the roar of the engines died away

and the nose of the machine tilted down, the pilot obviously making preparations to land.

He could see him peering down while he held the Dragon in a steady spiral glide.

In something like a panic, he looked about for a hiding-place, for the dark interior of the cabin was not the ideal place to start proceedings. The luggage compartment in the rear was clearly indicated, and into it he bundled just as the wheels touched the ground in a landing that was by no means smooth. For a minute or two he remained where he was, hardly daring to breathe, ears strained for any sound that might indicate the pilot's move-ments. At first, after the machine had finished its run, he could hear him moving about, but then there was silence. Slowly, an inch at a time, with his automatic held at the ready, he opened the door. There was no sign of the pilot. With finger crooked round the trigger, he opened the door wider, but was still unable to see Leroux. With no sound in his ear but the beating of his heart, he crept out. The machine was empty. A short rush took him to the cockpit, but there was no one in it. Then the open cabin door told its own story. Leroux had left the machine.

Ginger must be forgiven for hesitating, for the

situation was both unusual and nerve-testing. But he did not wait long. His first inclination was to get into the now vacated seat, push the throttle open and take off, and he strained his eyes through the windscreen to see what sort of country lay in front of him; but it was too dark to make out the details beyond the fact that the ground was covered with long, coarse grass with an isolated tree here and there. Whether he was facing an open runway, or whether the nose of the machine was pointing to the near edge of the landing-ground and the obstacles that would undoubtedly occur there, he could not tell, and anxious as he was to get away, he knew that to attempt to take off in such circumstances would be an act of madness. Where was Leroux? What on earth was he doing?

Swiftly he made his way to the cabin door and looked out. In the dim starlight he could just see that in all directions except one the ground was flat, a wilderness of dry earth and coarse grass; but behind the machine, some fifty to a hundred yards away beyond the tail, a sombre, blurred mass rose high into the night sky. From the ragged outline of the top he could just make out that it was either the edge of a forest or a clump of trees. But of Leroux there was neither sight nor sound. What

the man was doing in such a place he could not imagine; nor did he care particularly, for his main idea still was to get the machine into the air and back to Insula with all possible speed. As near as he could judge they had been in the air about twenty minutes to half an hour, which meant that Insula was at least fifty miles away, but in what direction he could only guess. That did not worry him; once in the air he could cruise round in a wide circle until he saw a landmark he recognized, after which the location of the aerodrome would be a fairly simple matter.

His next move was a mistake. Later, and in the very near future, he realized it, but at the moment he was so taken up with the idea of getting away before Leroux returned that he proceeded with the plan to the exclusion of everything else. A hundred yards was all the distance needed to get the lightly loaded machine off the ground, and it was with the object of examining the surface that he jumped out and ran quickly for a little way in the direction in which the nose of the machine was pointing. He may have gone seventy or eighty yards; then he stopped, peering into the gloom. Satisfied that the course was clear, he was about to turn back to the machine when a low, choking grunt brought him round with a rush to the point whence it came,

which was a few yards to the right. To his horror he saw a dark form rise slowly out of the grass. From the centre of it two orbs of green light glowed balefully.

Too late he realized what he had almost forgotten : that he was not on a European aerodrome but in untamed Africa. To say that he was petrified with fright is to express his sensations but mildly. He was not rooted to the ground, as the saying is, but he felt as if he was. At least, he was quite unable to move, although he wanted to run more than ever in his life before. Fortunately, he did not do so, or this story might have had a different ending. He just stood and stared, moistening his dry lips with his tongue. The creature, whatever it was—for he did not know for certain, although he supposed it to be a lion—did not move either, and thus they remained for several seconds.

At the end of that time he began to think more clearly, and remembering his automatic, he took it out and levelled it. At the precise moment that his finger was tightening on the trigger there came a sound that put a new complexion on the situation. It was the door of the Dragon being slammed.

Simultaneously, the green orbs went out as abruptly as electric lights that have been switched off. The Dragon's engines roared. The noise threw him into a condition of hopeless despair such as he had never before experienced, but there was little time to dwell upon the calamity. With a bellow that shook the earth the engines roared full out, and an instant later he saw the black bulk of the machine rushing towards him. For a second he stood transfixed; then he flung himself flat as the machine swept past him not five yards away, the wing-tips actually passing over his recumbent body.

He was up in a moment, staring wild-eyed at the spot where the lion had been. It was no longer there. Quickly he looked round, but the beast had completely disappeared.

Nevertheless, the relief he experienced at this discovery was more than a little squashed when he realized that he was alone on the veldt.

But was he? When he thought about it he was by no means sure, and he would have been far more comfortable in his mind had he been certain of it. What was to be done ? He must think—think.

What would Biggles do in a case like this, he

asked himself, but he could find no answer until a solitary tree about a hundred yards away caught his eye. To his distraught mind it was like

an island to a shipwrecked mariner, and he started off towards it with more haste than dignity; but he had not taken a dozen paces when, happening to glance over his shoulder, his worst fears were realized. The lion was trotting along behind him. He stopped. The lion stopped.

He could see it clearly now, see the great tufted tail switching from side to side. The desire to run was almost uncontrollable, but the first shock of horror having worn off, he had the sense to realize the folly of it, for there is no creature on earth that can outdistance a lion over a hundred yards, which it can cover in three or four mighty springs.

Slowly, still watching the beast, he began to edge nearer to the tree, a move to which the lion instantly responded by uttering a low growl. It reminded him of what he had once read in a book, that all wild animals are afraid of the sound of the human voice.

Forthwith he proceeded to put this to the test. The noise that emanated from his dry throat was by no means a triumphant shout; to him it sounded more like a plaintive howl, so the test

was hardly a fair one. In any case it failed, for the lion took not the slightest notice of it, but stood its ground, regarding him with significant interest.

Ginger, in his despair, remembered something else, and he could have kicked himself for not thinking of it earlier. In his pocket was a box of matches. It was the work of a moment to find it and drop a lighted match into the dry grass. To his infinite relief a little tongue of flame licked hungrily round his shoes. There was no breeze to help it, but the grass was tinder dry, and crackled cheerfully as the flames began to spread in a little circle. It had the disadvantage of making it difficult to see clearly what lay outside the radius of light, but he could just make out the form of the lion backing slowly away, and he offered a prayer of thankfulness.

Following up his advantage, he walked to the outside of the circle of fire on the side nearest to the tree and repeated the performance. Thereafter the gaining of his goal became only a matter of time, although he had some anxious moments as he crossed small areas of bare earth, similar to those that occurred at Insula, which he knew were caused by the levelling of ant-hills.

He had rather a job to climb the lower part of the tree, for the trunk was bare of branches, but his fears lent him unsuspected strength, and he managed to find a secure perch in a fork fairly near the top, from

which he regarded with disfavour the fires he had started ; for while they were burning only in a desultory sort of way, the smoke hung about and made his eyes and throat smart unmercifully. However, on the whole he had little cause for complaint, he decided, as he settled down to review the state of affairs, trying to muster the facts into some sort of coherent order.

First of all there was Biggles and Al . What would they be thinking? They would have heard the Dragon take off, of course, and rush to the spot. What would they do then ?

What could they do, stranded as they were at Insula, without transport and hopelessly cut off from civilization? And Leroux? Where had he taken the machine? Wherever it was, there seemed small chance of recovering it. Why had he done it? Obviously, either to leave them stranded or to curtail their activities ; to prevent them from finding—what ?

In either case it was a cunning move ; Ginger was forced to admit that. How had Leroux achieved it? How had he managed to take off in the Puss, yet return to the aerodrome so quickly on foot ?—for it was certain that he had not landed in an aeroplane. That would have been impossible without its being heard. These were questions for which he could find no answer, and which time alone might explain.

Somehow or other he had got to get back to Insula, there was no doubt about that, for it was useless to expect Biggles or Algy to come to his assistance when they could have no idea of where he was. In which direction was Insula ? It gave him a severe jolt when he was forced to admit to himself that he did not know, although if Biggles's theory had been correct when they had discussed why the Puss Moth had taken off towards the east, Insula ought to lie in an easterly direction. Biggles had contended that Leroux's easterly take-off had been only a blind—that his real destination lay to the west. Following that line of argument, the Dragon would have been on a westerly course when it landed, and if that were so, then Insula must now be to the east. But even if this assumption were correct, the thought of walking fifty or sixty miles across wild-beast-infested country without a rifle, and without food or water, appalled him ; yet he could see no alternative if he was ever to get back.

going on. Leroux must have seen him and struck him down. He then put him into the machine and flew it away, leaving the rifle where it had fallen.'



`But why in the name of goodness should he take Ginger with him ?'

`God knows. But he isn't here, is he ?'

Algy shook his head. 'I'm sorry, old lad, but your theory strikes me as being a bit weak in places. I can't think that Leroux would lumber himself up with a prisoner.'

Ì can't imagine Ginger getting in of his own free will. And what about young Marton ?

He 's being held prisoner, isn't he ?'

Algy nodded. 'That 's true enough,' he admitted reflectively.

`Then as I see it the odds are that before the night is out Ginger will either find himself with, or in the same place as young Marton.'

`Don't overlook the possibility that Leroux might have killed him and taken the body away to cover up the crime.'

Biggles thought for a moment. 'I can't somehow think that's likely,' he observed. 'Had there been a struggle, Ginger would have cried out and we should have heard him. In the same way we

should have heard a shot if Leroux had used a gun.'

`He might have used a knife.'

Ìn which case, surely there would be bloodstains.'

`Yes, I suppose there would.'

Ì suppose it wasn't quite fair of us to leave him here alone; but without making any excuses I must confess that I did not think matters had reached the stage when these people—Stampoulos—Leroux —or whoever they are—would go to such lengths as this.

Well, I don't think it 's much use staying here ; let's get back.'

Without speaking they walked over to the rest-house.

Ì'm afraid it's going to be a bad business for Ginger,' muttered Biggles, with a worried frown, when they were inside. 'And for us, if it comes to that. Without transport our hands are absolutely tied. It would be out of the question for us to start walking about looking for him; we might spend the rest of our lives searching in a country of this size,

even if it were possible to get about without supplies, which it isn't. It seems to me that the only thing left for us is to get to Malakal and cable home for another machine.'

'Get to Malakal—how?'

'Hoof it; there 's no other way.'

'You don't think these people will make another move?'

'Why should they? They've effectually put us out of action, as no doubt they intended.'

'What about seizing Sarda and making him speak?'

'How would you propose to do that?'

'By beating the hide off his back if necessary. He 's a dirty skunk.'

Biggles smiled grimly. 'I don't think he could tell us much even if he wanted to; I fancy he is in a very subordinate position,' he said. Then he started. 'By gosh! I tell you what we can do, though,' he whispered sibilantly. 'What about the telephone?'

'Yes, by James! We can at least tell these swine what we'll do to them if they don't send Ginger back.'

'I don't think we're in exactly the position to threaten,' Biggles reminded him gently.

'No, perhaps not. Never mind, let 's go.'

'Wait a minute; not so fast. What do you suppose Sarda is going to say if we just stroll in and ask him if he minds us using his telephone?'

'Why ask? Let 's stick a gun in his ribs and tell him.'

'Your impetuosity will one day be your downfall, I fear,' murmured Biggles sadly. '

Fixed as we are, I think it would be a wiser plan to keep what few cards we hold up our sleeves. I also think that we should be fools to start a rough house with our dark-skinned friend in the middle of the night; no doubt he could find his way about blindfolded, whereas we hardly know it in broad daylight. No, we'll wait for morning and then say what we have to say.—"When in doubt, sleep on it," is a very sound axiom. For the moment we'll get some sleep, although we'd better take

it in turns ; the idea of closing my eyes while I am within striking distance of that wall-eyed baboo becomes more repugnant every minute.'

The remainder of the night passed slowly, for although they tried to sleep, the knowledge of their desperate plight made it difficult, and they were both glad therefore when the sky grew grey with the approach of dawn, and the light enabled them to see about the preparation of a meal before proceeding to the prosecution of their plan.

Algy, whose job it was to make the coffee, strolled to the door and looked out while he was

waiting for the pot to boil. He was back instantly, gripping Biggles's arm excitedly. 'Here

's Sarda coming now,' he said tersely.

Biggles swung round. 'Sarda!'

'Yes.'

'What the dickens does he want at this hour, I wonder ?'

'I don't know, but it looks as if he's carrying something.'

'All right; stand fast. Don't let him see we're antagonistic.'

A moment later the half-caste appeared in the doorway. 'Goot morning,' he said cheerfully.

'Morning,' answered Biggles, smiling. 'What have you got there ?'

Sarda was holding a large calabash in his hand. 'Milk,' he replied. 'I think perhaps you like milk with coffee, huh?'

Biggles stared. 'Milk!' he cried. 'Where did you get it ?'

Sarda raised his eyebrows as if questioning

Biggles's surprise. 'From my goat,' he explained.

'Of course,' nodded Biggles, who remembered

seeing the animal tethered at the back of the bungalow. 'That 's very kind of you,' he went on. 'A

little fresh milk will be a treat.' If the half-caste was anxious to hold out the olive branch, it was up to them to accept it, he thought. 'By the way,' he continued, 'I suppose you know that our young friend went off last night on a joy-ride and hasn't come back ?'

`Yaas, I heard him go,' was the frank answer.

If he 's had to make a forced landing out on the veldt he'll be in a mess,' Biggles told him. 'And without an aeroplane to look for him, so are we. What do you think would be the quickest way of getting in touch with Mr.—what was his name ?Leroux. The gentleman who landed here yesterday. He can't be very far away, and he might be willing to help us.'

`Yaas, sure he'll help you,' declared Sarda emphatically. 'You ring him up on my telephone.'

Algy, who had heated the milk and was pouring it over the coffee in the cups, nearly dropped the lot in his agitation at this very unexpected suggestion. Even Biggles was at a loss for words for a second or two.

`Telephone!' he exclaimed. 'You didn't tell us you had a telephone.'

`You never asked me,' returned Sarda simply. `That 's true enough,' Biggles had to admit.

`Where does it go to ?' he inquired quickly.

`To Karuli.'

`Where 's that ?'

`That 's the tobacco plantation where my boss lives.'

`Why, that 's fine,' declared Biggles. 'Sit down a minute while I drink my coffee and I'll come back with you. I shan't be a minute.'

Nothing more was said until Biggles drained his cup and then stood up, reaching for his hat which lay on the table. Suddenly, as if his legs were too weak to support him, he sat down again. 'Dash it!' he muttered, 'I feel queer. Must have got a touch of fever.' He raised his hand to his forehead. 'Algy, do you mind passing me the quinine ?'

A moment later, as Algy made no reply, he raised his head wearily and looked across at him. He was sitting on his bed, swaying gently,

while beads of perspiration rolled down his pale face. 'Sorry,' he said slowly, as if with an effort, 'but I can't move.'

With a dreadful suspicion in his mind Biggles turned towards Sarda, although it required a tremendous effort of strength to do so. The half-caste was grinning broadly.

'You like my milk ?' he sneered.

'You swine!' Biggles ground the words out

through his teeth. He tried to reach to his pocket for the automatic he carried there, but the effort was too much for him and he sagged forward limply. Calmly, and without haste, Sarda walked across to him, removed the gun from his pocket and tossed it on to the table, afterwards treating Algy in the same way. Then he walked to the door. 'I'll be back,' he said with an unpleasant leer.

'Algy—old son—I'm afraid—we're sunk,' whispered Biggles weakly. 'That skunk —

has — poisoned us.'

Algy made no reply; he had rolled on to the floor and lay rigid. Only his eyes moved and showed that he was still conscious.

Biggles felt his strength ebbing fast. For a minute he fought against the action of the toxin as he had never fought before, but it was in vain. He made a stupendous effort to get to the table where the automatics lay, but it was beyond his strength, and he collapsed backwards across the low camp bed.

Lying thus, on the point of unconsciousness, he saw Sarda reappear, and, in a dreamy, subconscious way, saw that he carried a can of petrol in his hand. The half-caste unscrewed the cap and then

proceeded to splash the contents of the can on the flimsy walls of the building. When it was empty he tossed it aside and took out a box of matches. With a match between his fingers he turned to Biggles. 'You think you're damn smart,' he sneered. 'But you ain't smart enough. Not likely.' He struck the match. 'Presently I'm going to make out report how English gents like fools made big camp fire in the rest-house and set the whole place afire. Got burnt to death. Good story—huh? And no one to say no. Only me here to see it so no one calls me a liar. Now I go outside and hark at you frizzling.' With that he struck the match and tossed it against the petrol-soaked wall. With a dull, terrifying

roar a sheet of flame leapt upwards.

## CHAPTER VII

### GINGER COMES HOME

FOR Ginger the long night passed slowly. He saw no more of the lion. One by one the fires he had started died down and went out, and in spite of his predicament the desire for sleep became almost irresistible : more than once he caught himself nodding. Yet sleep he dare not, for fear he fell off his perch and injured himself, for he had no means of tying himself to the branches between which he sat astride.

It was, therefore, with profound relief that he saw the stars begin to pale, and the faint flush of dawn steal upward from the eastern horizon. A shaft of light shot upwards, another, and another, and in spite of his position he found heart to admire the glory of the African sunrise.

He waited no longer. A searching scrutiny of the landscape revealed nothing more alarming than a small herd of giraffes peacefully grazing, their ungainly legs outstretched, a mile or two to the south, so he prepared to evacuate his haven of refuge.

Before he did so, however, he glanced fearfully at the edge of the forest, still dark and forbidding, not more than a few hundred yards away. His eyes fell on something and he started, an expression of incredulity crossing his face. At the risk of falling, he leaned forward and stared as if he could not believe his eyes, for standing amongst the trees on the edge of the forest, close to a tumble-down shack, was an aeroplane. It was a Puss Moth, painted black.

A short, sharp scuffle, in which he left some of the skin of the palms of his hands on the rough bark of the tree, and he was on the ground, running towards his new hope of deliverance. He slowed down as he neared it, and advanced towards the but cautiously, automatic at the ready. No sound came from inside, so very quietly he opened the door and peeped in. The but was empty. That is to say, it contained no human occupant, although there were other things which at first made his eyes go round with wonder.

Stacked on one side was a high pile of petrol-cans, which a swift investigation showed were full. There was also a spare propeller, two under-carriage wheels, some fabric, and tins of dope. On a shelf were some tins of bully beef, biscuits, and condensed milk. 'An emergency repair depot, eh ?' he breathed, as he took in all these things with a

sweeping glance.

'My goodness! This is a bigger thing than we thought, and no mistake.'

There was nothing else of interest, so he went out, closing the door behind him, and hurried towards the Puss. The tanks, he found, were more than half full, which was far more than he would need for the short run to Insula, so he did not stop to fill them up, for he was afraid that some one might arrive at any moment. Inside five minutes he had started the engine and had taxied out to the spot from which the Dragon had taken off.

Watching carefully ahead for obstacles, he opened the throttle, and with fierce exultation in his heart, swept over the burnt patches of his fires into the air.

But his troubles were not yet over, for before many minutes had passed he detected a certain roughness in the engine, and a glance at the rev-counter confirmed what his ears had told him. The needle was flickering unpleasantly, and as he watched it he saw it sink slowly backwards. The trouble, whatever it was, was not very bad, but once trouble starts in an aero engine it usually develops quickly if it is allowed to run on, and this case was no exception, for although he throttled back to as near stalling point as he dare risk, the rev-counter dropped steadily, while the ever-rising thermometer warned him that if he went on much longer the whole thing might seize up.

'If I can only get back to the aerodrome I don't mind,' he thought desperately, as he throttled right back for a few seconds and dipped his nose in the hope of cooling the engine. But it was not to be. The noise grew steadily worse, and the vibration became alarming. He gave a grunt of satisfaction as his anxiously questing eyes picked out a dried-up waterhole that he had marked down on an earlier flight ; it was not more than three or four miles from Insula, and looking ahead he could just see the small clump of trees that hid the bungalow.

At that moment there was a sharp explosion in the engine and a little cloud of black smoke swirled away aft. 'It's no use,' he told himself bitterly as he throttled right back and examined the ground swiftly for a landing-place, for he had very little altitude.

The country was still fairly open, sun-baked earth for the most part covered with the usual coarse grass, and here and there stunted trees, alone and in little groups. There were also an unpleasant number of

high, conical mounds which he knew were ant-hills, and it was these that worried

him most. However, he chose the most open place he could see within gliding distance, and with teeth clenched he side-slipped down to land, for the place he had chosen was almost immediately below him. The wheels touched, bumped, and bumped again, and then the whole machine quivered as it ran over the rough surface. He pressed on the rudder with his left foot as a low group of ant-hills appeared directly in his path; the machine swerved sickeningly, and for a moment he thought his under-carriage must collapse, but it stood up to the strain, and the machine came to rest in a little fold in the ground.

'Well, I'm down, anyway,' he muttered, expressing the relief that most pilots would have experienced in similar circumstances ; and his relief was intensified by the knowledge that the machine was likely to prove their only link with civilization. He switched off the petrol and ignition and then jumped to the ground. There was nothing more he could do.

He did not like the idea of leaving the machine out in the sun, but there was no help for it; all he could do was to hurry to the aerodrome and advise the others of how things stood. Between them they might be able to effect the necessary repairs and get the machine into the hangar at Insula

before the sun reached its zenith. Accordingly, he took a last look round to make sure there were no wild animals about, and then set off at a steady trot in the direction of the aerodrome.

A trifle more than half an hour later, hot and dishevelled, he arrived at the aerodrome, and after a glance at the empty hangar and the bungalow, he turned his steps towards the rest-house. He was still several yards away when he was amazed to hear Sarda's voice speaking, although he could not catch the words. Wondering what was going on, he hurried forward just in time to catch Sarda's last sentence when he informed Biggles that he was going outside to 'hark at them frizzling'.

Ginger heard the whoof of the petrol as it flamed up, and then Sarda appeared in the doorway.

Considering that the half-caste was taken completely unawares, he acted with commendable promptitude. His right hand flew to his shirt. Ginger's hand flashed to his pocket. Both weapons came out together.



There was a flash of steel as the knife sped through the air. Simultaneously, Ginger's gun roared. A sharp stinging pain in the cheek made him jerk his head convulsively, but he recovered himself to see the half-caste stumble, clutching at his chest. For a moment or two he swayed, coughing; then his legs seemed to collapse and he pitched forward on to his face.

In a kind of daze Ginger leapt over the fallen body and tore into the rest-house, trying to fight off with his arms the heat that seemed to be blistering his skin. He saw Biggles lying across his bed and Algy stretched out on the floor. At the same time he was also subconsciously aware of a snake that was threshing about on the table on to which it had evidently fallen from the blazing roof. Stooping, he seized Algy, who was the nearer, by the collar, and dragged him outside. Then he dashed back to Biggles. The heat was appalling, and his nostrils were filled with the stench of singeing hair and clothes.

Seeming to move in a ghastly nightmare from which he could not awaken, he dragged his two unconscious comrades farther out on to the aerodrome, and then made a final sally into the flames for the kit-bags. He saw the rifle and the two automatics lying on the table, and paused for a moment to fling them through the doorway before snatching up the kit-bags and leaping clear. He would have liked to save some of their stores, but it was out of the question, so he ran towards Sarda, who was still lying near the doorway where he had fallen. But before he could reach him there was a rending, tearing crash, and the whole building collapsed in a cloud of flying sparks, burying the half-caste under the debris. Another moment and Ginger, too, would have been caught in the blazing ruin; as it was, he only just managed to leap back in time.

He saw that the sky had turned a peculiar shade of purple, and wondered vaguely why.

His face was still smarting and he raised his hand to it to see what was the matter. It felt wet and sticky, and unaccountably his legs began to tremble. 'I'm going to faint,' he thought, 'but I won't . . . I won't. Water . . . I must get water.'

Unsteadily he began to run towards the bungalow. The movement saved him and the crisis passed, and by the time he reached the building he felt better, although his actions still seemed to be unnatural and automatic. He found a pail of water in the kitchen and drank deeply, using his cupped hands. He also splashed some of the water over his face.

Then he snatched up the bucket and ran back to where the others lay. They looked ghastly, and a dreadful fear that they were dead set him trembling again.

`Hi, Biggles,' he croaked, tipping some of the water over the white face. Then he treated Algy

in the same way. But it was a good five minutes before he could get any response. Then Biggles moaned feebly and opened his eyes. Slowly, from vague wonderment, recognition crept into them.

`Hello,' he said with a foolish smile. 'Where the dickens have you sprung from?'

Ginger tried to speak, but the sky seemed to be going dark again. It was nearly black, and the sun a great white ball that bounced about on it. 'I I' he faltered, but he could get no farther. His knees crumpled under him and he flopped down like a coat falling from a peg.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SAVAGES

WHEN he opened his eyes again he was lying in the shade inside the hangar. Biggles, in his shirt sleeves, was dabbing his face with a wet rag, while Algy, still looking very groggy, was watching the proceedings.

`Feeling better ?' grinned Biggles.

Ginger struggled into a sitting position, his hand going to his face at the same time. `

What's all this ?' he asked as his fingers came in contact with a rough bandage that had been bound round his head.

`We had to tie your face up,' Biggles told him. `Somehow or other you've managed to cut it pretty badly; it isn't deep, but you've bled quite a bit.'

`Sarda's knife did it,' announced Ginger briefly. Biggles whistled. 'My gosh! You must have had a pretty close squeak.'

`Closish,' admitted Ginger.

`Where did Sarda go ?'

‘Go?’

‘Yes, where is he now? There isn't a sign of him.’

Ginger scrambled to his feet, walked unsteadily to the door of the hangar and pointed to the smoking remains of the rest-house. ‘He 's under there,’ he said quietly.

Biggles stared at him. ‘How did it happen ?’ he asked.

‘I shot him,’ muttered Ginger. ‘Not intentionally, though. We met at the door. He went for his knife and I pulled my gun, intending to tell him to put his hands up; but before I could speak he flung the knife at me and somehow or other the gun went off. I remember feeling the knife whizz past my cheek, and—well, I don't know quite what happened after that, except that I managed to drag you out and was just going to haul Sarda clear when the whole place collapsed on top of him.’

There was silence for a few moments.

‘Well, nu one can say that he hasn't got his deserts,’ observed Biggles philosophically. ‘If ever there was a cold-blooded murderer he was one. It may sound callous, but I'm no hypocrite, and I don't mind telling you that I feel happier with him out of the way. What with losing the Dragon and all our stores we are in a bad enough mess without him taking pot shots at us. And now, if you're feeling well enough to talk, you might tell us what

happened in here last night. In fact, there are a lot of things I should like to hear, such as where you've been and how you got back here so providentially. Another five minutes and all you'd have found of us would have been cinders.’

Briefly, but omitting nothing of importance, Ginger described the events from the time Leroux made his entry into the hangar.

‘The sooner we get out to that Puss the better,’ declared Biggles, when he had finished. ‘

With it we've got a good chance to put up a show; without it we're sunk. How far away is it, do you think ?’

‘I should say about three miles.’

‘That 's three-quarters of an hour's walk. Do you feel fit enough to travel ?’

'Me! I'm as right as rain,' answered Ginger. 'But what about you and Algy ? Neither of you look in what one might call the pink of condition.'

'I think we're pretty well all right,' answered Biggles. 'At least, I am, except for a sort of stiffness in the joints. How about you, Algy ?'

'Same as you,' replied Algy quickly. 'A bit stiff and a headache, that's all. I wonder what that dope was Sarda gave us.'

'Never mind about that ; I'm glad it was only a drug and not poison. Let 's muster up our things

and get away. It seems reasonable to suppose that Leroux will soon be looking for his Puss, and we've got to get to it first. It 's fairly clear now to see what happened. After he left here yesterday morning he didn't go back to Karuli, or whatever Sarda called his head-quarters, but dropped down at that secret landing-ground of his either because his engine was giving trouble or because he had resolved to steal our machine. I rather suspect it was on account of his engine, though, because, having given Sarda the dope to put us out of action—that was what was in the envelope he gave him, I expect—he could have come back here to-day without any risk. He may have been in a hurry to get to Karuli, and when his engine started to conk he decided to go down and come back for our machine.'

'It was a tidy step if he came on foot,' put in Ginger.

'Possibly he had a horse. I should say that that telephone of Sarda's goes to the aerodrome where you found the Puss, or at least passes through it. Did you notice a receiver in the hut, Ginger ?'

'No, I didn't, but I wasn't there many seconds and I might easily have overlooked it.'

'I was thinking that perhaps Leroux got into touch with his head-quarters at Karuli from there. No matter; he got back here somehow, as we know to our cost. But we'd better not stay here talking. Let 's get some food and water from the bungalow and make a bee-line for the Puss. With three automatics and a rifle we ought to be able to give a good account of ourselves if any one starts any rough stuff.'

'What are you going to do with the machine ?' Algy asked Biggles, as they all walked to where their kit-bags still lay on the aerodrome.

Tut the engine right if we can and fly it back here. Then, after we've

had a rest, we'll either go to Malakal and report what has happened, or else go and have a look for this plantation that we've heard so much about. I can't quite make up my mind which is the best course, but we'll talk more about that when we've got the machine. We'd better park these in the bungalow for the time being,' Biggles added, as they picked up their kit-bags.

It's not much use trying to do anything about—that,' he concluded, nodding towards the still smouldering ruins of the rest-house. 'It will be hours before those ashes have cooled down.'

They hurried on to the bungalow, put their kit

in the living-room, and after closing the doors and windows, they set off in the direction of the abandoned aeroplane.

'Suppose the telephone rings ?' asked Ginger as they hurried along.

I thought of that,' nodded Biggles. 'In fact, I seriously considered putting a call through, but decided that it would be better left alone. The silence will get the people at the other end guessing, whereas if we try to use it we might easily slip up, which would tell them that Sarda's scheme has misfired, and that we are in charge of the situation here. It's another thing we shall have to think about when we get back. For the present, I shan't have any peace until we've got that machine in safe custody.'

They had no difficulty in finding the Puss Moth, nor did they encounter trouble of any sort on the way. For this they were all thankful, for what with nervous reaction after what they had been through, sheer weariness, and the heat of the sun, they were in no case to meet adversity with their customary optimism.

'Well, here she is,' observed Biggles, as he opened the cabin door. It's Harry Marton's machine, there's no doubt about that. Look!' He

pointed to the fabric under the exhaust pipe where the black paint had been rather carelessly applied, with the result that the original red dope showed through it as a dull maroon tint. 'Did you form any opinion as to what was wrong with the engine, Ginger ?'

'Yes, I fancy it's faulty lubrication. She started by running rough and got hot very quickly.'

If it's nothing worse than that it shouldn't be a very big job,' muttered Biggles, as he brought out the tool kit. 'Great Sam! This sun is the

dickens; mind how you handle that cowling—it's nearly red-hot.'

None of them is likely to forget the next hour and a half. The sun, as it approached its zenith, blazed down with relentless fury, making all the metal parts of the machine so hot that the handling of them was a matter of extreme discomfort. Flies and stinging insects added to their misery. However, in the end they found the cause of the trouble—a piece of cotton waste in an oil lead—and thereafter it was only a question of time before the job was done.

With a grunt of satisfaction Ginger screwed up the last engine-cowling bolt, and then turned to where the others were collecting the tools and replacing them in the kit. As he did so, a movement some distance beyond caught his eye, and he looked up.

'Say, Chief, look what's coming,' he cried.

Both Biggles and Algy sprang up and followed the direction of his eyes with their own.

Approaching them at a fast trot, in single file, and not more than two hundred yards away, was a line of savage warriors. And they were the real thing. Nude except for a short skirt of leopard skin and a garter-like fringe of white hair bound below their knees, they fitted perfectly into the inhospitable landscape. All were armed with short-handled broad-bladed assagais, with a tuft of hair at the end, and carried oval-shaped shields of white ox-hide threaded with black strips of the same material. Above the head of the leader rose a plume of glorious ostrich feathers, held in place by an encircling band.

'I don't like the look of those gentry,' stated Biggles, as he gazed at them steadily.

'Can't we start up and get away before they reach us?' suggested Algy.

Biggles shook his head. 'Impossible,' he said. 'It would be fatal to try to get off without first clearing a runway, even if we knew that the engine was giving full revs, which we don't, and shan't until we run her up. Somehow I can't think those fellows mean any harm, though; they must have seen plenty of white men, and most African natives have learned by this time that it pays to leave them alone.'

Ginger, take the rifle into the cabin and keep us covered without letting them see it.

Above all, don't look scared, anybody, but be ready for anything.'

‘If you don't think they mean any harm, why do you say you don't like the look of them ?’

asked Ginger from inside the cabin.

‘Because I didn't notice at first the direction they are coming from,’ replied Biggles shortly. ‘It's the direction of Karuli, and the emergency landing-ground where you collared this machine, isn't it ?’

It is,' answered Ginger briefly.

'Well, here they are,' continued Biggles. 'Leave the talking to me, although as none of us knows their lingo there isn't likely to be much.'

The black warriors slowed down to a walk a short distance away, and then advanced in a rough half circle.

Biggles raised his hand. 'Stop there,' he called loudly.

Rather to his surprise the order was obeyed. 'What do you want ?' he asked curtly.

The leader raised his assagai to his forehead in a curious sort of salute. 'What you make with my master's aeroplane ?' he asked harshly, in an even, high-pitched voice.

Biggles expressed no surprise at this unexpected question. 'Who is your master?' he asked.

'My master white man.'

'Yes, I'd guessed that, but what is his name ?' 'My master say go Insula and find aeroplane.' A faint smile flitted across Biggles's face as he realized that the savage was no fool. 'Where is

your master ?' he asked.

The native pointed with his assagai to the east. 'How far away ?'

'Two day—three day march.'

Biggles suspected that the fellow was lying, but he had no means of proving it. 'You go and tell your master that we're taking his aeroplane to Insula, where he can have it just as soon as he brings my aeroplane back,' he answered in a firm voice.

'If you no give aeroplane, then we take it,' declared the other impudently.

Biggles's eyes glinted and his lips came together

in a tight line. 'You insolent rascal ; you talk to me like that and I'll thrash the skin off your back. Be off, and sharp's the word.'

The savage did not move a muscle.



`Did you hear me ?' cried Biggles, in a voice that cut through the air like the crack of a whip.

The savage stood his ground. He did not answer, but some of the others began to mutter amongst themselves.

`Give me that rifle, Ginger,' ordered Biggles quickly.

Ginger leapt out and put the weapon into Biggles's hands.

`Now!' snapped Biggles. 'Perhaps you've heard it said that Englishmen always keep their word. Think hard on that, because in one minute by my watch I'm going to shoot at any one I see within spear-throw.'

Some of the savages began to back away instantly, while the leader, clearly torn by indecision, looked at them and the white men in turn. Finally, finding himself alone, he turned and followed the others in the slow, insolent, provocative manner sometimes employed by small children when made to do something against their will.

Biggles's eyes narrowed. 'You cheeky swine,'



'In one minute by my watch I'm going to shoot at any one I see within spear-throw.'

he snarled, and throwing up the rifle, sent a shot whistling in the direction of the cause of his ire.

The native's pose of indifference disappeared in a flash. Bending low and zigzagging like a snipe, he ran for his life until he disappeared from view behind a slight rise in the ground a quarter of a mile away.

'Start up, Ginger,' snapped Biggles. 'Algy, come and help me choose

the best path to get off. There 's no wind, so the direction doesn't matter.' He started off at a run, but pulled up again with a jerk. 'Hark!' he cried.

From afar off came the low, powerful hum of aero engines.

Algy threw up his arm, and with finger outstretched pointed to a tiny speck in the east. '

There he is,' he cried. 'It's the Dragon, and it's coming this way.'

'Come on,' yelled Biggles. 'If he catches us on the ground we're done.'

The next few minutes can only be described as hectic. With perspiration streaming down their faces, Biggles and Algy ran along the least obstructed fairway, flinging aside large stones, trampling down small ant-hills, and examining the ground for holes which might spell disaster if the fast-moving wheels of the Puss struck them during the take-off. Then, satisfied that they had a fairly clear run, they raced back to where the machine was ticking over.

Tun her up,' shouted Biggles to Ginger, and running round to the rear of the fuselage, he threw himself across it to keep the tail down while Ginger opened the throttle. The blast of the slipstream as it struck him was as refreshing as a cold shower-bath, and while it lasted he revelled in it. Then, as the roar subsided suddenly, he dashed up to the cockpit. '

How does she go ?' he asked.

'She 's O.K.,' answered Ginger crisply.

'Then let me have her. In you get, Algy ; make it snappy,' ordered Biggles, as the roar of the twinengined machine suddenly increased in volume. Glancing up, he saw the blunt nose tilted down towards them. As he jumped in and slammed the cabin door behind him, something struck the engine-cowling with a metallic zip. It was a spear; the point had pierced the thin sheet-metal cowling, and remained impaled, the haft sticking out at right-angles. There was no time to remove it, for glancing through the window he saw the savages closing in on the machine in a wild charge.

'Hold tight,' he yelled, and shoved the throttle open.

The actual take-off, for the few seconds while it lasted, was a hair-raising affair. Twice the machine was thrown into the air by tufts of

grass before it had reached flying speed, and each time, as the wheels returned to earth with a terrifying rumble, they all thought that the machine must break into halves. How it stood up to the strain Biggles could not imagine, but it did, and he sank back with a pathetic smile, shaking his head sadly as the machine finally lifted.

À little more of this sort of thing and I shall be ripe for a madhouse,' he yelled, as he held the nose down for a moment to get a reserve of speed, and then zoomed high into the air, looking to right and left for the Dragon.

For a moment he could not see it, but as he turned slowly it swung suddenly into his field of view. To his surprise it was two or three miles away, flying in a northerly direction, steadily, as if the pilot intended maintaining his course.

`What 's his idea ?' shouted Algy, who had also seen it.

`Goodness knows,' replied Biggles. 'I thought he intended going for us.'

`So did I.'

`Maybe he was, but changed his mind when he saw us take off.'

Àre you going to follow him ?'

`What's the use ? According to Ginger we haven't more than an hour's petrol. I'll bet he's got a full load. If we followed him for more than half an hour we should find ourselves down in the jungle with empty tanks, so that would be a crazy thing to do. We'd better get to Insula and fill up;, then we'll do a spot of quick thinking.'

I'm getting sick of the sight of Insula,' muttered Ginger.

`So am I,' Biggles told him shortly, 'but it's the only port we've got in this perishing wilderness.'

`What about that landing-ground at the repair depot where I pinched the Moth ?'

Biggles started. Then he nodded towards the ground where the savages, clustered together, were staring upwards. 'They came from that direction, and I fancy they'll go back that way, otherwise I'd consider it,' he said. 'In any case, though, to be on the safe side we ought to go to Insula first and fill up our tanks, in case anything has

happened to the fuel you saw at the repair depot. We should

look fools to arrive there and find that the stuff had all been taken away. Keep your eye on those niggers and see which way they go when they move off. I'm going to Insula.'

## CHAPTER IX

### BIGGLES SUMS UP

'WHAT happened to those niggers at the finish ?' asked Biggles as the machine ran to a standstill on Insula aerodrome.

'The last I saw of them they were walking away in single file, just as they arrived,'

replied Algy. 'Which way did they go ?'

'East—back to where they came from, presumably.'

'We mustn't forget they're about if ever we have to land in that district,' declared Biggles.

'I've no desire to finish this crazy business with one of these skewers in my ribs,' he added, pulling out the assagai that had stuck in the engine-cowling.

'Well, now we're here, what's going to be done about it ?' asked Ginger.

'I've been thinking about that on the way,' answered Biggles thoughtfully. 'It's a bit of a problem. There 's one thing we must do, though.'

'What 's that ?'

'Collect everything that's likely to be useful to us and hide it—make a cache somewhere.

What I have particularly in mind is the petrol and oil.'

'Why is it necessary to move it ?'

'Because I think it's an absolute certainty that sooner or later some sort of attack will be made on this place. Leroux and his crowd are aware that we have got the Puss, and they must know perfectly well that this is our only depot for supplies. They'll realize, unless they are

bigger fools than I take them for, that the quickest and surest way to put us out of action would be to remove or destroy this supply of fuel here. That would put the tin hat on things as far as we're concerned, wouldn't it ? Immobile, as we should then be, we should be helpless. In fact, I'm not altogether sure that we should even be able to get back to civilization; Malakal and Juba are our nearest points, and they are both a long way away. It may sound pessimistic, but from what I've heard about Africa I doubt very much if we could carry enough food and water to last us the journey if we had to walk, and it would be fatal to start without enough because, barring a lucky shot which might produce fresh meat for us, there is no food to be had. To set out in the hope of living on our rifle would be folly, but in an emergency we might have to do that. That's why I say I should feel happier if we had a secret dump somewhere. Moreover, by removing the fuel it is more than likely that we should make things awkward for Leroux.

In the past he has had to rely on a supply of fuel here, or it wouldn't be here; so if he lands and finds it gone he might be in a mess.'

'Yes, I see that,' put in Algy. 'It will be a bit of a sweat, though, won't it—moving it, I mean ?'

'I don't think so; there isn't as much as all that, and we needn't take it far away.'

'I feel inclined to raze the place to the ground,' continued Biggles, as they walked towards the bungalow. 'Leave it like the Bosche left some of the French villages when they retired in 1918—you remember ? That would make Leroux and Co. scratch their heads, I'll warrant. It's always a good plan to get your enemies guessing; it 's far more disconcerting than knowing the truth, even when the truth is bad news. We played that game for all it was worth during the War, particularly over the submarine question.

Bosche submarines used to put out and just disappear into the blue; never came back.

Did we shout to the world that we'd caught them in a trap and sent them to the bottom ?

Not likely. We did the brer rabbit trick ; lay low and kept on saying nothing. Do you wonder that

the Bosche submarine crews got all jumpy? I don't. No doubt they could have heard without turning a hair that their pals had gone to Davy Jones, but the dreadful uncertainty as to their fate got 'ern

guessing, and the guessing got 'em groggy. When Leroux and Co.

turn up here to find out what has happened to Sarda, as they are bound to do before very long, and find the place deserted, stores gone and all the rest of it, they'll get all hot and bothered, particularly when they work it out that we must still be somewhere in the offing.'

'But if you think they're likely to turn up here why not wait for them, and when they arrive, shoot them up ?' suggested Algy belligerently.

Tor two very good reasons,' replied Biggles promptly. 'The first is that we don't know how long we should have to wait. It might be days, and while we were waiting our nerves would get on edge, particularly as we should have to mount a very strict guard day and night to prevent ourselves from being taken by surprise. I can't think that they'd be such fools as to just stroll on the aerodrome, or land on it, supposing—as they must —

that we are here. We might find ourselves besieged by a mob of savages; we know there are at

least a score in their pay, and if they have a score they might well have a whole tribe.

And the second reason is that, even if we caught them at a disadvantage, we couldn't just open fire and shoot them down or we might find ourselves in court on a charge of murder.'

'But surely they've given us cause enough

Of course they have. We know that, but how could we prove it ?'

'What about the snake in the cockpit ? And the way they doped us, and stole our machine, and

'Told in a court of law that would all sound like a wonderful fairy tale,' declared Biggles, shaking his head. 'No, when we step up to a judge with our story we've got to be able to trot out proof. Nothing counts for anything at law without that. And what about young Marton ? Have you forgotten him ? As his father is paying for all this, and it looks like costing him a tidy penny, Harry's rescue must be our first consideration. The bringing of his abductors to justice is a secondary affair, although, naturally, we shall do that if we can. Open a couple of tins of bully and some biscuits, Ginger ; we might as well eat while we've got the chance.'

`What beats me is what the whole thing is about,'

remarked Algy presently, digging into a tin of bully with his penknife.

Biggles shrugged his shoulders. 'I've thought quite a bit about that,' he said. 'A lot of things have happened since we turned up here, but when you come to examine them you'

ll find that they haven't provided much information beyond the fact that Harry Marton is alive and some one is using his machine. This is the position in a nutshell, as I see it now. Marton landed here on his way to the Cape. For reasons not yet ascertained he was abducted, held prisoner, and his machine confiscated. My own opinion is that it was because he discovered something—accidentally, no doubt—about this place, or Leroux, or the people who are running Insula. Very well! We arrive on the scene and start nosing round. As soon as it became known in the enemy camp that we were going to stay at Insula steps were taken to cause us to remove ourselves; failing that, to remove us. Sarda tried to put us off in the first place by talking of fever and so on, but when he saw that we intended staying he rang up his head-quarters and told them what was happening ; whereupon without any loss of time things began to hum. Within a few hours an attempt was made to murder us, which proves

how desperately anxious these people must be to get us out of the way. The question is, why ? Ostensibly they are running a tobacco plantation. That that is merely a blind to cloak their real activities is certain, for no one is likely to stop them growing tobacco.

Just what they are up to—but let 's leave that for the moment. The point is, it is perfectly clear that transport plays a vital part in their operations.'

`Why are you so sure about that ?' asked Algy, reaching for the biscuits.

`Dash it all, man, look at the trouble they've been at to establish aerodromes and fit them up. They must have at least three.'

`How three ?'

Insula is one, the place where Ginger found the Puss is another, and the one at their head-quarters. Obviously they must have got one there. Then there's the telephone connecting them up. All these things have meant a pretty heavy expenditure of cash, from which we can reasonably infer that the business, whatever it is, is a highly profitable



one. They're using air transport remember, which again is by no means cheap. That suggests to me that either speed is very important, or else—'

'Well ?'

Or else it offers a way of concealing the cargo they are carrying. As we know as well as any one, an aeroplane can get about with less interference than any form of surface transport. You can take it from me that the whole thing boils down to that cargo, and when we have found out what that is we shall know everything. Harry Marton found out what it was, I'll bet. He found out by accident, no doubt, but it put paid to his Cape record.'

'Which means that it is something of an illicit or contraband nature?'

'Definitely.'

'What could it be ?'

'The only thing I can think of at the moment is slaves. There 's a big business still done in slaves between this part of Africa, the Sudan, and Arabia. Our people have tried to stop it for years; they've curtailed the slavers' activities but they haven't stopped the traffic, not by a long way.'

'Human freight is heavy stuff. What is a slave worth—have you any idea ?'

About a hundred pounds, I believe.'

'By the time they've paid their running expenses, Stampoulos and Leroux are not going to get very fat out of that, carrying only two at a time in a Puss.'

'True enough. But as I said just now, what these people are doing is of secondary importance to us. We've come to get Harry Marton. We've managed to get his machine, which is as much as old Mr. Marton hoped for; but in view of what we know we shall have to count the trip a failure if we don't bring the boy back in it.'

And we can't very well do that until we know where he is,' observed Ginger tritely.

Biggles glanced up. 'There 's an awful lot of truth in that, Ginger, my lad,' he agreed. 'The first thing we must do, then, is to find out where

he is.'

And having done that, what are we going to do ?' inquired Algy dubiously. 'Are we in a position to launch an attack on the enemy stronghold for the purpose of rescuing him ?'

'Frankly, I don't think we are,' admitted Biggles. 'Quite apart from the white men, who are doubtless armed with rifles, there are those toughs we saw this morning to be considered. I'm not exactly aching to get tangled up with a bunch of assagais, and that's a fact.'

'Sez you,' agreed Algy warmly. 'What's the programme, then ?'

'We've got to locate this place Karuli before we do anything else.'

'What are you going to do—fly round and look for it ?'

'I'm not going to walk, you can bet your life on that.'

'When are you thinking of making a start ?'

'We'd better leave it until to-morrow. It's after two o'clock now, and we've got to shift this petrol yet.'

'Then let's get to it,' suggested Ginger. 'I'm nearly asleep on my feet, and the sooner the job 's done the sooner we can all hit the hay. This business is getting a lot too much like hard labour for my liking.'

'I'll bring a gang of navvies next time to do the rough stuff,' Biggles promised, smiling, as he put on his hat and walked to the door. He reached it, and was about to step outside, when a movement in the distance caught his eye, and instead of going out he took a quick pace backward.

Algy snatched up the rifle and peered over his shoulder. 'Antelopes, by jingo,' he muttered.

Ginger joined the others, and looking out, saw a herd of long-horned animals grazing peacefully about a mile away near the eastern boundary of the landing-ground. 'What about knocking one of them over and having steak for supper ?'

'I think it's a rattling good idea if it can be done,' agreed Biggles. 'It's worth trying, anyway. But you'd better not go wandering off, Ginger ; you're tired as it is. Algy, you take the rifle and try your hand at stalking while Ginger and I shift the petrol. If you get one there 's no

need to drag the whole beast back; cut off a haunch: that will be enough.

The rest would go bad before we could eat it.'

'Good enough,' agreed Algy enthusiastically, and with the rifle in his hand he crept out into the coppice.

'Come on, Ginger, let's go and find a good place to dump this petrol,' ordered Biggles. '

We shall have to do it quietly or we shall alarm the game.'

## CHAPTER X

### ALGY'S ANTELOPE HUNT

ALLY soon covered half the distance that separated him from his quarry, for he had plenty of cover, but thereafter the going became more difficult. He knew that it was hopeless to attempt to get within range of the wary beasts by going across the open aerodrome, and the country on either side was nearly as bare. After he had left the coppice on the edge of which the aerodrome buildings were situated, he had been able to advance by keeping a large clump of bushes between himself and the herd, but he had now reached the end of the bushes, and from there on the ground, in a direct line with the animals, offered no concealment of any sort. He estimated his distance from them to be about eight hundred yards, although in the clear atmosphere it looked considerably less, and he could see them distinctly.

Thinking that it might be possible to achieve success with a long shot, he slipped his rear sight up to the eight hundred mark and raised the rifle ; but he lowered it again immediately, for the heat-soaked air rippled and quivered like disturbed water, making it quite impossible to take steady aim.

'I shall have to get a lot nearer than this,' he mused, and casting about for another way of approach, he saw something that had previously escaped his notice. It was a shallow gully, presumably a dried-up watercourse judging by the dry reeds that lined its banks; it meandered across the landscape, passing within two hundred yards of the antelopes at its nearest point. He remembered seeing it from the air.

Lying flat in the grass, for in order to reach it he had to pass for some

distance in full view of the animals, he wormed his way towards the gully, and managed to reach it without alarming the game. He waited for a minute or two to recover his composure, for in the heat of the sun the method of progress he had been compelled to employ was exhausting, and then set off down the gully, picking his way with great care, knowing well that the slightest noise would be fatal to his object.

He was some time gaining his vantage point, for here and there the gully was very shallow, and in such places he had to crawl ; but in the end he reached it and wormed his way into the reeds that

lined the bank in order to reach the brink and thus command a view of the antelopes.

Slowly and with infinite pains he drew himself level with the top and peeped over. There was not an animal in sight. Dumbfounded, for he was convinced that the antelopes could not have seen him, he could only lie and stare. But his quarry might have dissolved into thin air for all the sign there was of them. Then, in the far distance, he saw a tiny cloud of dust slowly settling, and it told him which way the beasts had gone.

'Well, dash my wig!' he muttered, in a tone of mixed disappointment and astonishment. '

That 's good-bye to our supper.' Slowly he slid back down through the reeds, and with all need for concealment gone, was about to rise to his feet when he saw something that made him gasp, and sent him squirming into the thickest part of the rushes, where he lay motionless.

Coming up the gully was a line of armed savages, the same, judging by their attire, as they had seen that morning when they had been at work on the Puss Moth. But now, at their head, in an open shirt, shorts, with a solar topee on his head and a rifle crooked in his left arm, marched a white man. No longer was there any mystery about the antelopes.' disappearance, and Algy saw at once that to attempt to move would be folly, for to do so without being seen was out of the question; so he could only lie still and hope for the best, although, lying in the thick reeds as he was, he felt it was unlikely that he would be discovered. Nor would he have been except for an extraordinary unlucky chance that completely upset his calculations, and in a few seconds altered every possible aspect of the situation.

The warriors, with the white man striding along in front, held steadily and silently on their way towards the aerodrome buildings which, Algy had no doubt, was their objective, and they were only a few yards away from him when it happened. Without warning, from out of the dry reeds on the opposite bank came a leopard and two cubs, all yawning and stretching like domestic cats that have been asleep on the hearth. Algy nearly froze with horror when he realized that they must have been there all the time, and that during his stalk down the gully he must have passed within a dozen yards of them.

However, there was no time to dwell on his narrow escape, for the leopard, looking up, saw the party just below. Its sleepiness disappeared in a flash. With a vicious snarl it crouched

low, the very embodiment of feline fury. Another second and it would have charged, but at that moment the white man fired. That the bullet had gone home Algy knew, for he distinctly heard the soft phut of the lead striking flesh, and the creature's behaviour proved it. With a frightful roar it leapt high into the air, tearing at its side with its teeth; then, as it struck the earth again, it twisted, and with a single bound sprang straight into the reeds where Algy lay hidden.

His actions during the next two seconds were prompted far more by sheer instinct of self-preservation than lucid thought. The leopard landed almost on top of him. It saw him at once and turned like lightning, teeth flashing and claws bared, a picture that was to remain clear in his mind for a long time to come. With a convulsive movement he jerked up the rifle, shoved the muzzle almost into the beast's mouth and pulled the trigger. Then, not waiting to see the result, still clutching the rifle, he flung himself over the bank and ran like a hare towards the bungalow.

As he ran two thoughts flashed into his whirling brain. The first was that Biggles would take no notice of the shot, thinking that he had fired at the antelopes, and the second was that the man he had

left standing in the gully might shoot at him, for the fact that he was with the natives more than suggested that he was the 'master' to whom the leader had referred that morning during the altercation near the Puss. With this new fear in his mind he crouched low and swerved ; and it was a good thing that he did so, for a moment later a bullet tore up the ground close to his feet and zipped away into the air. He swerved again, expecting another shot to be fired, but it did not come, and in a detached way he wondered why. He noticed that the unknown man's rifle was of a heavier calibre than his own, and

the report much deeper. Would Biggles hear it ? Yes! Algy saw him run out of the trees with Ginger, stand staring for a moment, and then make a dash towards the hangar where the Puss Moth was housed.

Still no shot came from behind, so he risked a glance over his shoulder, and the sight that met his gaze explained why. Strung out along his path of flight, in a direct line between him and the white man and therefore obstructing his view, were the savages, running ; but any relief he experienced from the fact that he was no longer under fire was more than counterbalanced by the proximity of the nearest savage, who, evidently a faster runner than his companions, was well out in front of them and only a short distance behind Algy. What was worse, his speed was terrific and he was rapidly closing the distance.

Algy saw at once that he could not hope to reach the bungalow before he was caught, and his back twitched at the thought of the assagai which might pierce it at any moment.

There was only one thing to be done and he did it, for the nearer the fellow with the spear got to him the more desperate was his danger.

Still running, he jerked the empty shell out of the breach of his rifle and reloaded. Then he whipped round, dropped on to his knee and took aim. He saw the brawny arm go up, the spear flashing in the sunlight, and he knew that he could not afford to miss—not that he was likely to at such close range. As he glanced along the sights his war-training came to his aid, and his manner changed. Coolly and deliberately he drew a bead on the shining black chest of his would-be slayer, and squeezed the trigger. At the report the savage sprawled headlong, the spear plunging into the ground, where it remained with the haft pointing towards its owner.

Algy looked at the others, now perilously close ;

but a rapidly increasing roar made him swing round. The Puss, with the cabin door flapping open, was taxi-ing tail-up towards him. He needed no invitation to join the others inside. He fired two quick shots at the savages, causing one to fall and the others to stop, and then raced to meet the machine. A bullet smacked through it somewhere as he literally tumbled aboard, and then lay, with his head on Ginger's knees, panting for breath. For a few seconds the wheels bumped over the rough ground ; then the floor seemed to press upwards into him and he knew they were off.

`Thank goodness for that,' he muttered fervently.

`Where's that antelope steak ?' growled Ginger.

Algy glared. 'I'll knock your block off if you talk to me about antelopes,' he snarled. 'I'll let you go next time. Where are we making for ?'

`Goodness knows—I don't,' replied Ginger frankly. 'We hadn't thought as far ahead as that when we saw you making a bee-line for home.'

`Then I hope it's to England,' declared Algy. 'These wide open spaces may be he-man's country, but they're not mine—not by a long shot.'

## CHAPTER XI

### CRASHED BY A RHINO

As soon as he had recovered his breath Algy tapped Biggles on the shoulder. 'Where are you making for ?' he asked.

`Karuli,' answered Biggles without hesitation. 'Are you crazy ?'

`Possibly.'

`Haven't we had enough trouble already without shoving our heads into the lion's mouth ?'

`We aren't going to shove our heads into anything of the sort.'

`Sounds like it to me.'

`Maybe, but I believe that at the moment the lion—as you call him—is on Insula aerodrome.'

`You mean, you think that tall fellow with the sallow face and black moustache who fired at me is Stampoulos ?'

Èither him or his head man. He looks Greek enough, anyway. While he and his dusky cutthroats are at Insula seems to me to be the right moment to go to Karuli.'

`To try to rescue Marton?'

‘You don't suppose I'm going there for my

health, or for the sake of somewhere to go, do you? What happened to your antelope hunt

? It seemed to go wrong somewhere.'

‘It certainly did,’ agreed Algy emphatically. ‘First I bumped into Stampoulos and his crowd of stiffes, and while I was wondering which way to go a leopard bumped into me.

Between the lot of us it was quite a merry party while it lasted.'

‘What happened ?'

‘I let drive at the leopard and Stampoulos let drive at me.'

‘You scored and Stampoulos missed, eh ?’ ‘That 's about it.'

‘And then you decided it was about time to go home.'

‘I did, and without stopping to pick flowers on the way. That bunch of niggers with flattened-out bill-hooks settled all doubt in my mind about that. What happened to them after I got aboard, did you see ?'

‘The last I saw of them Stampoulos had joined them and they were all marching towards the bungalow, carrying two of their number, as they say in story books.'

‘I expect they'll look for Sarda.'

‘In which case I hope they'll find him—and

plant him. I wasn't looking forward to the job. But the point is, they're a tidy step from home, and as far as I can see they've got to walk, whereas we're getting a ride. With luck we ought to be at Karuli first.'

‘You're not so optimistic as to expect to find the place deserted ?'

‘No, but with the big boy absent, the people in charge—whoever they may be—may not know how to act. If we find the place at all I shall be satisfied.'

‘By the way, did you hide the petrol at Insula ?'

‘We hid pretty nearly everything portable ; we'd just finished and



loaded the kit-bags in the machine when your gun-shot announced that the hunt was over ; although from what you tell us it was only just beginning.'

'We shall have to get a move on if we're going to find this place before dark,' observed Algy, glancing through the window at the sun, which was sinking fast towards the horizon. 'Don't you think it would be a better plan to land at this repair depot place Ginger talks about, to re-fuel, and hide the stuff in the same way as you did at Insula ?

That would give us two bases where we could get petrol in an emergency, and at the same time put another one of Leroux's landing-grounds out of action. If we go on nobbling his fuel I shouldn't be surprised if he finds himself walking presently, instead of swanking about in our Dragon.'

A furrow creased Biggles's forehead as he considered the proposition. 'I'm inclined to think you're right,' he said at last. 'Quite apart from the points you've raised, we're all tired and it's getting a bit close to sundown for operations. We don't want to get benighted on the open veld.'

'No, by James, that we don't,' agreed Ginger warmly. 'I've already had one go at it and that was one too many. If I've got to look at lions I prefer to see them through nice thick cast-iron bars; or better still, behind a sheet of plate-glass in a museum. I don't talk so much,' interrupted Biggles. 'Just keep your eyes open for this repair establishment; remember, I haven't seen it yet.'

'You can't make any mistake,' declared Ginger. 'It's on the south side of a large wood, or forest; I don't know how far it extends because I didn't stop to look when I was there, but it 's the first wood you come to.'

'Then that must be it—straight ahead.'

Ginger peered forward through the windscreen. 'That 's the one,' he exclaimed. 'It will probably

be difficult to see the but from the air because it 's just on the edge of the trees, but the landing-ground is on the south side.'

Biggles throttled back and began a long glide towards the objective, and on reaching it circled twice, both to make sure nobody was about and to pick out the best runway.

Then, satisfied that all was well, he landed and taxied slowly towards the hut, which he could now see on the edge of the forest. A trio of ant-hills prevented him from going right up to it, so he switched off, and picking up the rifle, jumped out, watching the door suspiciously. The others followed him.

'I don't think any one can be at home, or they'd have come out when they heard us coming,' he said confidently. 'Let 's go and have a look at the place, not forgetting to keep our ears open. We mustn't forget that Leroux is floating about somewhere with the Dragon, and he might decide to drop in here. I hope he does. I don't like this Puss after the Dragon; feels a bit cramped for elbow room. What the He broke off and spun round as a terrifying noise rose on the still air; it sounded like a cavalry charge and a pig being slaughtered at the same time.

There was no need to look far for the cause of it. Bearing down on them from the fringe of the forest was a rhinoceros. With its great horned snout held low, and its ridiculous little tail switching round in circles, it thundered towards them, squealing in fury, an avalanche of condensed wrath that would have been funny to watch from a safe place.

The three airmen scattered like small boys caught scrounging in an orchard. Algy made for the nearest tree; Biggles streaked for the nearest point of the forest; while Ginger, yelling to the others to follow him, made for the hut. He reached it, only to discover to his unspeakable horror that the door was locked. In an agony of fright he looked back, and to his relief saw that the great beast was not concerned with them. It had continued its charge straight on past the place where they had been and was bearing down on the aeroplane with the relentlessness of a runaway train. He heard Algy, secure in his tree, shout, and then two rifle shots in quick succession ; but neither the shots nor the shout had the slightest effect on the berserk monster. With a fearful crash it struck the Puss Moth full amidships, and the machine crumpled up like a match-box that has been trodden on. The noise of the impact seemed to drive the brute to even greater fury, for it snorted, bucked, kicked, and stamped on the wreckage in a rage that was as insensate as it was destructive. Finally, as if satisfied that the life of the strange bird had been crushed out of it, it gave a final snort and trotted off, shaking its head in a vain endeavour to dislodge an elevator that was firmly impaled on its horn.

As it disappeared in the distance Algy dropped down from his tree, Biggles emerged from the forest, and Ginger from the side of the but

from which he had watched the final act of the tragedy. They met near the machine and for some seconds gazed at the tangled wreck in silence.

'Who was it suggested landing here ?' inquired Biggles at last, coldly.

'I did,' confessed Algy hesitatingly.

'Then perhaps you wouldn't mind starting to stick the bits of this aeroplane together again,' Biggles told him.

Algy's reply was a roar of laughter, in which presently the others joined. It was, of course, pure reaction, but it relieved the strain.

'It's all very well for you chaps to laugh,' observed Biggles at last, wiping his eyes, 'but it isn't



With a fearful crash it struck the Puss Moth full amidships

going to be so funny walking home; you take it from me.'

'But did you ever see an aeroplane in such a mess in your life ?' protested Algy.

'Never,' admitted Biggles. 'And as long as I live I shall remember the picture of that ugly brute walking off with half our tail on its nose. Well, I hope it carries it about with it for the rest of its life ; by that

time it should be pretty sick of the sight and smell of aeroplane fabric.'

I'm not going after it to take it off,' declared Algy. And to think I once paid to go to Whipsnade,' murmured Ginger sadly.

Whereupon they all laughed again.

'Well, we haven't got much else left to lose, there is that about it,' observed Biggles ruefully. At the rate we're going, we shall be lucky if we finish this affair with a pair of pants apiece.'

He stooped down, dragged the crumpled kitbags out of the wreckage, and threw them clear. His own came last, and as he moved some mangled three-ply that was holding it, in order to release it, he stiffened suddenly while a puzzled look came into his eyes.

'What is it ?' asked Algy who was watching him.

Biggles pulled the kit-bag clear and tossed it

out on to the grass. Then he bent down, picked up a piece of the three-ply and put it to his nose, all the while frowning as if he strove to catch an elusive memory.

I don't know,' he said slowly. 'Queer smell . . . reminds me of something . . . something I'

ve . . . smelt before. Can't think what the dickens it is, though.' Still wearing an extraordinary expression, he allowed the three-ply to fall from his fingers. Then he shook his head as if dismissing the matter and turned to where the others were standing. 'Did you say there was some grub in that hut, Ginger ?' he inquired.

'Yes. There 's some bully, hard biscuits, and condensed milk,' replied Ginger.

'Then let 's go and eat in case an elephant knocks the but down while our backs are turned,' said Piggies bitterly. 'Combating crooks isn't bad fun, but when all the beasts of the ark join in, the game ceases to be amusing.'

'We can't say we didn't know they were here,' murmured Algy.

'That may be, but I did at least expect them to mind their own business considering that we've never interfered with them. Come on, let's get up to the but.'

They picked up their kit-bags and walked up to the wooden building.

‘It’s locked! You can’t get in,’ cried Ginger, suddenly remembering.

‘Can’t I! You watch me,’ retorted Biggles grimly.

He tried the handle, found that what Ginger had said was correct, backed a yard or two away and then charged. There was a splintering crash as the flimsy lock tore through the woodwork and the door flew open.

‘Step in and make yourselves at home,’ he said smiling. But the smile faded from his face as, followed by the others, he entered the primitive building. ‘I thought you said there was a stock of petrol here, Ginger,’ he exclaimed sharply.

‘There was,’ muttered Ginger weakly.

‘Then perhaps you wouldn’t mind pointing it out to me,’ invited Biggles politely.

‘It’s—it ’s gone,’ stammered Ginger, staring at the place where the cans had been piled.

His eyes switched to the shelf where the food had been. ‘So has the food,’ he cried.

‘So has everything, by the look of it,’ said Biggles quietly, looking round the bare walls from which everything of a portable nature had been moved.

‘I’m afraid we’ve arrived on the scene a bit too late,’ he went on; ‘good thing we weren’t relying on that petrol for refuelling, isn’t it? It just shows that it doesn’t do to count on anything in this business.’

‘Somebody must have been here,’ declared Ginger.

Biggles eyed him thoughtfully. ‘Wonderful!’ he said. ‘How did you work that out?’

Ginger smiled, for he was accustomed to Biggles’s mild sarcasm in moments of anxiety. ‘

That’s how the door came to be locked, too, I expect,’ he observed. ‘Whoever came here locked the door behind him when he went. It wasn’t locked this morning.’

Biggles's eyes were roving round the walls. 'Telephone has gone, too,' remarked Algy, reading his thoughts.

'Yes, but it isn't far away, I fancy,' answered Biggles. 'It cost too much to put up and it's too useful to them to be abandoned altogether. We'll find the wire outside when we look for it.'

'What are we going to do about food ?' asked Algy. 'It looks as if some one will have to take the rifle and try to shoot something.'

'No use taking a rifle,' returned Biggles. 'Why not ?'

It's empty, and we've no more ammunition. I fired the last two shots at the rhino. Ginger only took one clip of six rounds when he loaded it in the hangar. You fired one at the leopard, one at the nigger who was chasing you, two at the others, and I've fired two just now. Mental arithmetic isn't my strong point but I am able to work out that that makes six altogether ; which means that the rifle is now about as much use as a walking stick—

not so much, in fact.'

The others stared at him aghast.

'Then we shall have to fall back on our automatics,' stated Algy.

'Do you feel like taking on the denizens of this oversized menagerie with an automatic?'

'No, I can't say I'm keen.'

'Neither am I ; and neither, I imagine, is Ginger. It will be dark in about five minutes, anyway.' 'Then we're here for the night ?'

'That's about the size of it—unless any one prefers the open air.'

'And in the morning ?' asked Ginger anxiously.

'We'll talk about that when it comes,' replied Biggles, 'but it looks as if we shall have to push on to Karuli.'

'Karuli ?' cried Algy and Ginger together.

It can't be anywhere else, as far as I can see,' declared Biggles. 'We're too far away from Insula, Malakal, or Juba to hope to reach them. To tell the truth, when I saw the Puss Moth go west it struck me that

good might come out of evil. Leroux is bound to fly over here shortly, and even if he didn't intend landing in the ordinary way, he would not be able to resist coming down when he saw the wreck on the ground. It looks like a first-class crash, and he would no doubt be overjoyed at the prospect of finding us tangled up in it, having with great consideration removed ourselves from the orbit of operations.

Whereupon we could step out and ask him how about it—with our guns. So a half-formed idea was in my mind that we'd wait here for him, keeping an eye open, of course, for Stampoulos and his bodkin-pushers, who might also decide to look in here on the way home. But that was before I knew the food had gone from here. We can't stay now. It might be days before Leroux turns up, in which case we should pass out from hunger while we were waiting. As things are, we've got to move off at the crack of dawn, if only to get somewhere where the supply of vitamins A, B, C, and D are available.'

And you think the best place is Karuli ?'

'Certainly, unless we wander about in the hope that some kind beast will give itself up and invite us to dine off its anatomy.'

Nothing more was said. Darkness fell, and completely worn out by the day's events, they lay down on the floor to get as much rest as the unyielding surface would permit.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE SNAKE IN THE GRASS

THE sun was peeping over the horizon when they awoke the following morning, stiff but clearheaded, and refreshed by a sleep that not even the inhospitable conditions of the but could deny them. Nothing was said about food or water, although they all felt the need of both as they went outside into the clear atmosphere and surveyed the landscape. Except for a herd of small buck far out beyond the landing-ground there was nothing living in sight, so without loss of time they prepared to trek, with their backs to the rising sun.

'How about the kit-bags ?' asked Algy eyeing them dubiously. 'Are we going to take them with us ?'

Biggles shook his head. 'It will take us all our time to get ourselves where we're going without dragging extra weight about,' he opined. 'There 's nothing in them that we really need at the moment, so I think the best plan would be to hide them. We daren't leave them on the



ground or the white ants will tear everything to pieces, and we don't want our log-books chewed up. I tell you what: let's sling them in a tree out of sight in the forest ; we can use some of the wires from the Puss for the purpose.'

'That 's a good idea,' agreed Algy.

Without any more ado they set about putting the plan into action. It occupied but a few minutes, and after they had completed the job to their satisfaction they once more foregathered in front of the but and prepared to move off. Before doing so, however, Biggles made the others wait while he quartered to and fro like a hound on the western side of the but and some little distance away from it. Presently his persistence was rewarded, and he gave a cry of triumph. 'Here it is!' he shouted, and the others joined him at a run.

'Here 's the telephone,' he went on as they came up to him. 'There goes the wire, and the receiver is in this box, I expect.' He pointed to a small wooden box half covered with leaves that rested at the foot of a tree. 'Yes, that's it,' he added, lifting the lid. 'All they've done is to clear it out of the but in case we found it. They realized that we knew about the hut, of course, because the Puss Moth was taken from here. Incidentally, it must have given them food for thought wondering how

on earth we found the place ; I imagine Leroux would be hard to convince that he was directly responsible.'

'Are you going to use the 'phone ?' asked Algy.

'And tell them that we are somewhere on the line? Not likely! You see what it is worth to us, though. All we have to do is to follow the wire and it should take us right up to their front door.'

'By James! I never thought of that,' declared Algy.

'That was why I was so anxious to find it,' Biggles told him as he set off along the track.

For a long way the wire followed the southern boundary of the forest, about twelve feet from the ground, sometimes fastened to trees by insulators, and sometimes being carried across gaps by bamboo poles. Then the timber grew more sparse and in the end gave out altogether, leaving them facing a dreary expanse of sun-parched plain with clumps of the inevitable fiat-topped trees dotted about here and there, often forming supports for the telephone wire. Beyond, at a distance which they were unable to estimate but which was certainly several

miles, great outcrops of grey stone appeared, increasing in size until they finally merged in an extensive range of mountains.

Biggles eyed the scene of desolation meditatively. 'We've got to make those mountains to-day,' he said softly, as if he were thinking aloud. 'You see what we're up against,' he went on in a normal voice, turning to the others. 'Lack of water is going to worry us more than the food shortage, and I think it is extremely unlikely that we shall find water this side of those mountains ; the colour of the vegetation would probably reveal it if there were any, and I don't see a spot of green anywhere. There should be water in the mountains, though, either a spring or a natural reservoir of rain-water. We're going to need it, too, by the time we get there; that 's why we've got to get across this plain to-day.

Anybody any suggestion to make ?'

There was no reply.

'Come on, then, let 's go,' decided Biggles, and taking the lead, he set off at a steady pace, still keeping his direction by the wire.

For hours they marched while the sun climbed high into the heavens and tortured them with burning rays of white light that dried the perspiration on their skins as quickly as it formed. They did not speak, for there was nothing of importance that called for comment; in any case, with their mouths parched as they were, conversation would have been an effort. Game was fairly common, particularly antelope, giraffe, zebra, buffalo, and the ungainly wildbeeste, which threw up their heads and watched the passage of the three travellers with interest. Once they saw a rhinoceros, standing under a tree attended by the curious birds that live on the ticks infesting its hide, and act, so it is said, as sentinels. Fortunately, the beast was some distance away, and although the birds rose into the air uttering warning cries, it merely contented itself with a series of short rushes in different directions ; whereupon, finding nothing on which to vent its bellicose spite, it returned to the tree, and stood gazing blankly with its short-sighted eyes in the opposite direction.

From time to time Biggles looked speculatively at the mountains, now appreciably nearer but still some distance away.

'How far are they, do you think ?' asked Algy on one such occasion.

'Five miles, but they're probably farther,' was Biggles's cheerless reply.

Whereupon, without pursuing the subject, they tramped on. They were all getting in a bad way, and although they must have been well aware of it, no one made any comment.

Ginger in particular

was suffering severely, but not for the world would he have admitted it.

‘Any one got the time ?’ he croaked, after another interminable silence.

Biggles glanced at his wrist. ‘My watch has stopped,’ he answered. ‘How about yours, Algy ?’

‘Smashed it this morning,’ replied Algy briefly. ‘It must be about three o’clock at a rough guess,’ he added.

‘I should say it ‘s about one or half-past,’ observed Biggles, glancing at the sun. Just a minute.’

He sat down and proceeded to take off his shoes and change the socks over from one foot to the other, inviting the others to do the same. ‘It’s an old army dodge,’ he said, ‘and like most army dodges, well worth trying.’

Presently they set off again, making for what looked like a break in the mountains, which they could now see very clearly. They did not improve on closer acquaintance: the grey granite peaks thrust high into the air, gaunt and stark, without a sign of life.

Suddenly Biggles stopped, staring hard at the ground some distance to the right. Then, turning at right angles, ‘This way,’ he said.

‘What about the telephone wire ?’ asked Algy in surprise.

‘Can’t bother about that now,’ replied Biggles shortly. ‘We’ve got to find water within the next hour, and anyway, we can always come back to the wire. This is a game path,’ he went on, pointing to a definite well-worn track which had been the reason for his sudden change of direction.

The others saw that it was studded with innumerable hoof-marks which had evidently been made when the ground was soft, but had since been baked to brick-like hardness by the sun.

‘You think it may lead to water ?’ asked Ginger, suddenly grasping the

reason for Biggles's move.

‘I hope so,’ returned Biggles. ‘I’m no expert tracker, but I seem to remember reading that by years of usage wild animals make definite paths to their drinking places,’ he explained. ‘We can only trust that this is one. Let’s keep going.’

They marched on, nor did they stop or speak again until they were within a stone’s throw of the rocks, now dreadful in their appalling desolation. Ginger was clearly very near the end of his endurance. He swayed as he walked; his eyes were glassy and there was a ring of dry dust round his cracked and blackened lips. Algy was in little better case. He could no longer keep his mouth closed and he was drawing his breath in short, painful gasps. Biggles alone seemed anything like normal, but his face was drawn and his lips compressed in a tight, obstinate line.

‘Stick it, chaps, we can’t be far way from water now,’ he said encouragingly. But his heart was sick with anxiety, for he knew that in all their travels they had never been in such a desperate plight. He felt in his pocket and took out his automatic as he continued along the track, looking warily to right and left as he reached the first rocks, shimmering in the noonday sun. His eyes fell on a half-devoured zebra and he redoubled his vigilance. With every nerve tense, he jumped violently, as, with a snort and scurry, half a dozen long-horned buck leapt up just in front of him and dashed off. For a second or two they bunched as they tried to scramble through a narrow cleft in the rocks. His hand jerked up. Bang! bang! bang! spat the automatic.

At the third shot one of the animals fell, but it was up instantly, dashing after the others apparently unhurt. Biggles watched it go dispassionately. Then he turned to the spot from which they had appeared, and a cracked cheer broke from his lips as his eyes fell on a small pool of water. It was stagnant and it looked foul, particularly at the edges where the mud had been stirred up by the buck, which had evidently been wallowing in it.

It was characteristic of him that instead of rushing forward and drinking he first looked back for the others. They were both hurrying towards the spot, Ginger making heavy weather of it some distance behind Algy. Biggles ran into the water beyond the edge of the disturbed area, and filling his topee, went back to meet them. Algy, he could see, would be able to reach the pool, so he passed him and went right on until he came to Ginger, who was beginning to stumble.

`Here you are, laddie, take a sip,' he said. 'Take it gently . . . steady . . . steady . . . that'll do for the present. Feel better ?'

Ginger looked up and smiled wanly. 'That 's pretty good stuff,' he vowed.

`You wouldn't think so in the ordinary way,' grinned Biggles. Then he took a sip or two himself, allowing the liquid to trickle over his lips with ineffable relish.

`Can I have some more ?' asked Ginger.

Biggles passed him the hat. 'Go easy with it,' he warned him. 'You'll knock yourself out if you try taking too much at one go. Come on up to the pool.'

They found Algy sitting by the edge of the water bathing his face; his hat stood beside him, and from it he drank sparingly from time to time.

Ì suppose we shouldn't complain,' observed Biggles presently when, their most urgent pangs of thirst assuaged, they were lying by the pool. `But this is pretty awful stuff. It ought to be boiled to make it fit to drink, but not having a can it can't be done.' He got up suddenly. 'Stand fast everybody,' he ordered. 'Or better still, collect some of this grass and start a fire. You might be able to get some twigs from those bushes over there, but watch out you don't trip over a lion; there's one not far away. I shan't be long.'

He was back in about ten minutes, grinning broadly, and carrying a large slab of red meat in his hand. He nodded approval when he saw that a small fire had been started.

`Where the deuce did you get that ?' asked Algy. `What is it ?'

`Sirloin of zebra,' smiled Biggles, laying the meat on a flat rock and commencing to carve it into strips.

`But where?'

Ì'm afraid I've purloined somebody else's supper,' explained Biggles. 'I saw a dead zebra just

below as we came up, but until I went back to it I couldn't be sure how long it had been dead. It must have been killed within the last few hours, which suggests to me that a tawny-coated gentleman by

the name of Felix Leo isn't far away. He'll probably return to his kill at sundown for another snack, so we'd better keep clear of it. We shall have to move off from here, too, before nightfall, or we shall find ourselves holding up the drinking parade. If Mr. Leo wants to come and have a drink, I don't feel inclined to stand in his way and argue about it.'

Algy glanced at the sun, already sinking below the peaks of the mountains. We'd better see about finding a shakedown, then,' he suggested. 'It won't be long before it's dark.

Hadn't we better take some water with us ?'

'All we can do is bung up the ventilation holes in our topees and fill them,' replied Biggles, impaling a piece of meat on a stick and holding it to the blaze. 'We needn't go far away. I don't fancy sleeping among these rocks, but we can't be choosers.'

For a little while they busied themselves with their meal, toasting thin strips of the meat and eating it half raw. It was tough and not very

palatable, but their hunger was such that these shortcomings did not worry them, and at the end, with their strength rapidly returning, they were quite cheerful. They spent some time cooking what remained of the meat, and then, with Biggles carrying the whole of the unpleasant-looking stock threaded on a piece of wood, and the others each carrying a hatful of water, they set off to find a place where the night could be passed with reasonable safety.

This was more difficult than it first appeared, for although there were plenty of caves and shallow recesses in the rocks, they all looked as if they might already harbour inmates ; however, in the end they chose—somewhat hastily, for by this time it was almost dark—

a ledge of rock several feet wide which was completely overhung by a low cliff. The last remaining minutes of daylight were spent collecting dry grass and anything that looked as if it would burn. They did not light this, for even if only a small fire was kept going their entire stock of fuel would not last more than half an hour, so they decided to preserve it against emergency, when it might serve as a protection against wild beasts or as a means of illumination in case of any other trouble. The night was then divided into three watches,

Ginger taking the first, which is usually reckoned to be the easiest. These dispositions made, they settled themselves down for the night.

For some time Ginger squatted on a rock and stared into the darkness with restless, anxious eyes. A breathless silence had settled over the land, but it was not the comforting quiet of peace and security ; rather was it an uneasy, living silence, a tense hush of expectancy, as if all the wild creatures of the veld were crouching, watching, waiting for something to happen.

Presently a faint hum rose on the air. At first he wondered what it was ; but when a tiny, burning pain, as of a stinging-nettle, stung him on the nose, he knew, and he brushed his face irritably with the back of his hand. Then came another, this time on the cheek, and he stirred uneasily although without alarm.

`Confound these wretched mosquitoes,' he muttered angrily, as a dozen stings assailed his neck simultaneously. 'We're going to have a bonny night if this goes on ; it must be because we're near that water,' he thought, as he remembered Biggles once saying something about mosquitoes frequenting damp, marshy places, which they made their breeding-grounds.

But in spite of all he could do to prevent it, which was no more than pulling his shirt up round his neck, the vicious attacks of the insects grew steadily more determined and intense, and he glanced behind him, realizing that Biggles and Algy were likely to be severely stung in their sleep ; but their quiet, regular breathing reassured him, and he resumed his vigil in silent misery.

The moon, a great lemon-tinted ball of light, crept up slowly over the horizon and bathed the landscape in a pale, eerie glow, insufficient, however, for him to make out more than the broad outlines of his immediate surroundings and the vast expanse of plain that rolled away—to the end of the world, it seemed—from the foot of the hill on which they had made their camp.

Suddenly he stiffened and his mouth grew dry with horror as a dreadful uproar broke out somewhere below him. It began with a ferocious, snarling roar that was instantly drowned in a shrill scream of mortal terror. Then came a frenzied drumming of hoofs on hard earth, punctuated with blood-curdling growls. Another scream, ending in a pathetic, choking sob ; then a silence that was quickly followed by a ghastly purring sound.

Ginger shivered, and edged a little nearer to the overhanging rock.

`What the dickens is going on?'

Biggles's voice made him jump, but he was relieved to hear it. 'Phew!' he gasped, moistening his lips and swallowing hard. 'This is awful.'

'What is? What's going on? Something woke me up.' Biggles raised himself into a sitting position.

'Something is being killed, or has just been killed, down below. I think it was a lion killing a zebra. I can't see anything, but the noise was shocking. I'm fairly sweating with funk, and I don't mind admitting it. Not only that, but I am being torn to pieces by mosquitoes,' went on Ginger miserably. 'It feels as if they've had most of the skin off my face already.'

Biggles rose to his feet. 'I know,' he muttered. 'I'm nearly bitten to death, too. I was conscious of the things biting me even in my sleep. Whereabouts is this lion do you suppose ?'

'I don't know exactly. The sounds came from somewhere out there in the darkness beyond the water-hole. I think we ought to do something about it.'

'What do you suggest we do—tell the lion to go home and not be a naughty boy ? A lot of notice he'd take of us whatever we did while he's busy over his supper. We shall have to do something about these mosquitoes, though, or we shall be in a pretty state tomorrow.'

'What the dickens can we do about them ?'

'Light a fire, that's the only thing. The smoke may drive them away, or at least discourage them ; and as the flames may keep the lion at a distance too, we shall be killing two birds with one stone.'

'But we haven't enough sticks to last half an hour.'

'Then we shall have to jolly well get some more. It isn't much use trying to sleep anyway in this fly-bitten, lion-infested bedlam. Hark!'

They remained silent for a few seconds. From the direction of the water-hole came a horrid sound of purring and lapping, both at the same time, like the noise made by a contented domestic cat over a bowl of milk, but magnified a hundred times.

'That doesn't sound very pretty, does it ?' observed Biggles quietly.

'What 's the brute doing, do you think ?' 'Slobbering about in the blood of the wretched creature it has just killed, I fancy. It 's some



distance away though ; moreover, by the time friend Leo has had a good fill of fresh zebra he'll be more likely to think about forty winks than worrying us. At least, we can only hope so.' Biggles brought his hand down sharply on his cheek. 'Dash these pests,' he snarled. 'I'm going down to those bushes for some more brushwood for the fire,' he went on aggressively, taking out his jack-knife and opening it.

'Don't be a lunatic, Biggles,' cried Ginger, seriously alarmed.

'Lunatic or not, I'm going. These little swine are driving me crazy. The bushes aren't more than a dozen yards away so I don't think there 's any danger—no more than there is here that I can see. If the lion has ideas about us there 's nothing to stop him putting them into action at either place.'

'That 's true, I suppose,' admitted Ginger reluctantly. 'But somehow it seems safer when we're all together. Wait a minute while I wake Algy and light the fire. If we're going to light it we might as well start it off now so that you can have the benefit of it.'

So saying, he nudged Algy, who sprang up with a stifled cry of alarm.

'What 's the matter ?' he asked breathlessly. 'Oh, I know; I guess it 's my turn for guard.'

'No, it isn't,' Ginger told him, 'but all the mosquitoes in Africa are having a stinging com-petition and they're using us as a stadium. I fancy the winner is on the small of my back, just out of reach. Our eyes will be completely closed up in the morning if we let them go on with it, so we're going to light the fire and try to smoke them out. Biggles has volunteered to go and get some more brushwood.'

As he spoke Ginger struck a match and held it to the fire. It blazed up brightly at once, and cast a lurid glow over the dry earth, the rocks, and their travel-stained faces. In fact, although the fire was only a small one, it glowed like a beacon after the darkness, which naturally had the effect of making everything outside its flickering radius more difficult to see.

It may have been due, or at least partly due, to this that Biggles put his foot into it—as the saying is—in the literal sense of the word. True, he was not looking at the ground. In spite of his declared assurance, he was by no means certain that he would not encounter a lion, either the one they had heard or another, so as he walked towards the bushes his eyes were raised to the surrounding rocks and not on the ground immediately in front of him.

He must have put his foot right in the middle of the coiled python. He did not see it. He felt something soft and yielding under his foot, and knowing that whatever it was it was alive, he sprang back; but quick as he was he was too late. In a flash, almost before he had realized what was happening, the snake, which always seems so slow and somno-lent, had coiled itself about him, pinning his left arm and the hand in which he carried his automatic to his side. Fortunately, his right hand, in which he held the knife, was left free, and he at once made a number of wild slashes at the head of the snake as it reared up before him, at the same time letting out a yell that must have been heard a mile away.

Now he knew quite well what every one knows who has lived in countries where this particular type of snake occurs—that the python is not venomous; it cannot give its victim a poisonous bite, but endeavours to kill it by crushing it in the same manner as a boa constrictor; but this it is unable to do unless its tail is firmly anchored to something substantial, such as a tree or a rock.

Even in his present extremity Biggles remembered that there were no trees near. For the rest, he was conscious only of the creature's great weight and the swaying head with its ghastly, flickering tongue a few inches from his face.

His wild yell brought Algy and Ginger to the scene with a rush, and they saw at a glance what had happened. Both carried their automatics, but to use them was clearly out of the question, for it was impossible to put a bullet through the python without a big risk of its also going through Biggles. Admittedly, its head was clear of him, but to hit it as it swayed from side to side would have tried the skill of an expert revolver shot, and neither of them was that.

Biggles, realizing by this time that in his cramped position he could not hope to give the creature a mortal wound, and seeing the others run up, flung the knife clear. 'Go for the tail,' he shouted. 'The tail—the tail—slash its tail.'

Algy heard the steel tinkle against a rock, and darted to the spot where the knife fell, but to his utter and complete consternation he could not find it.

'A light, Ginger,' he screamed hysterically. 'Get a light!'

But Ginger had no light, for after starting the fire he had put the box of matches down on the rock on which he had been sitting. However,

he did not wait to explain this, but darted back to the fire, and grabbing a handful of blazing twigs, managed to hold them in spite of the pain until he reached the spot where Algy, now on his hands and knees, was still looking and feeling frantically for the knife.

Fortunately the grass, being bone dry, flared up the instant the twigs fell into it, revealing the knife lying in a hollow of the rock. Algy saw it first, and reached for it, but an instant before his hand closed over it, the python's massive tail, seeking a hold on the same rock, swung round and sent him over backwards.

But Ginger had also seen the knife. Disregarding Algy, he snatched it up with a gasp of relief and flung himself on the creature's tail just as it found the rock. Out of the corner of his eye, in the yellow light of the fire, he saw Biggles fall heavily, still swathed in the python's gigantic coils, so he started hacking at the tail with a fury born of blind panic.

The rest was nightmare. The dry skin, pulsating under his left hand as he grasped it, made him feel sick, but he stuck to his task desperately, vaguely conscious of shouting to Algy to help him. The snake, thus attacked, released its tail-grip on the rock and began threshing about, dragging him with it ; but he hung on, still shouting for Algy to help him.

Algy, whose breath had been completely knocked out of him when the snake had thrown him over backwards, rose unsteadily to his feet and threw himself across the black, sinuous body of the creature between Biggles and Ginger. Gripping it with his knees, he pressed the muzzle of the automatic into it and pulled the trigger.

The result was instantaneous. The python, with incredible speed, released its hold on Biggles and turned on him ; and taken thus unaware, he sprawled forward as its full weight descended on his back.

At this juncture Ginger, who was still hacking at the tail, behaved with commendable presence of mind. Holding the knife in his teeth, he tore up a double handful of dry grass, held it in the flames for a second, and thrust the whole blazing mass into the snake's open mouth.

Almost before they were aware that the danger had passed, the python dropped to the ground with a crash and glided swiftly away into the darkness, leaving them all staring at each other, panting for

breath and trembling violently from shock and exertion.

'Are you—hurt—Biggles?' gasped Algy.

'Don't think so,' replied Biggles weakly. 'A bit bruised, I think—nothing more. Gosh!

What a horror to meet on a dark night—ugh!' He shuddered at the recollection.

'If ever I sleep again in this perishing country it won't be my fault,' declared Ginger emphatically, wiping his hands on a tuft of grass. 'I'd no idea such frightful creatures still walked the earth, or you wouldn't have got me here. No, sir. First lions, then mosquitoes, and now snakes—I think it's about time we headed for home and let them have this place as likes it.'

'Let's head back to the fire for a start,' suggested Biggles practically.

He led the way back to where a few twigs still burnt briskly and flopped down limply on the rock on which Ginger had sat during his brief guard. The others saw that he was pale, and knew that he had been more shaken than he had admitted.

'Well?' asked Ginger questioningly, looking at the others in turn.

'Well, what?' inquired Algy.

'What are we going to do?'

'Stay where we are,' put in Biggles shortly. 'What about the mosquitoes?'

'What about them?'

'You said you were going to get some more firewood.'

'Quite right, so I did,' confessed Biggles. 'But I've changed my mind. Of course, there's nothing to prevent you from going and getting some. Not me,' interrupted Ginger decisively. 'I've done all the exploring I'm going to do for one night.'

'Look here, it's no use going on like this,' said Biggles seriously. 'We shall have to try to get in a few winks of sleep or we shall all feel like death in the morning. Let's keep double guards; that won't be so nervy as doing it solo. Ginger and I will start. In an hour Ginger will lie down, and you, Algy, will take his place. An hour later I'll lie down

and Ginger will have to get up again ; and so on. It's heavy going, but it can't be helped; it's better than all of us sitting up all the time, anyway. We shall have to do the best we can with the fire ; by keeping it a mere flicker we might be able to make it last for some time, and it can always be made up if any visitors start prowling round.'

'Sounds a good idea to me,' observed Algy. 'And me,' agreed Ginger.

And so it was agreed, and for the second time they settled down to pass the night.

## CHAPTER XIII

### WHAT NEXT ?

THE stars were still in the sky the following morning when Ginger was awakened by the crackling of twigs to find Biggles and Algy busily warming up the remains of their unappetizing meat supply, and the realization of their position brought him to his feet immediately. It was bitterly cold, and he was glad to stretch his hands to the warmth of the fire.

'Did you see anything during your watch ?' he asked Biggles, more for the sake of saying something than for anything else, after congratulations had been exchanged on their survival of a perilous night.

'I didn't see much, but I heard a lot,' grinned Biggles.

'Same here,' nodded Ginger. 'From the grunting, coughing, and splashing, there were enough animals round that water-hole to fill all the zoos in the world six times over.'

'Yes, it was a bit alarming,' agreed Biggles. 'Just sink your teeth into some of this steak, you two, and make the most of it; it may be some time before we get another meal. And don't be too long about it ; the sooner we are on the move the farther we shall get before the sun becomes really hot. It 's going to be a scorcher again by the look of it, and I'm a bit stiff from the fond embrace of that overgrown worm last night.'

'You're lucky you aren't completely stiff,' grinned Ginger, as he helped himself to the uninviting fare.

It took them only a few minutes to clear up what was left of the meat ;

they washed it down with a small quantity of the brackish water, and then, tightening their belts, they prepared to march.

'Which way ?' asked Algy.

'We'll cut across to the telephone wire again,' replied Biggles. 'It is certain to follow the easiest pass through the mountains. I expect we shall find Karuli the other side of them.

If Stampoulos is growing tobacco, and I think he 's bound to put up some sort of pretence of doing it, even if the plantation isn't genuine, it won't be on these rocks, that's certain. I don't mind admitting that I'm a bit curious to see this place of his.'

They found the wire without difficulty, and following its course, came to a great gash in the mountains, the floor of which, nevertheless, ascended steeply. They could not see very far ahead,

for the ravine pursued a winding course, but that did not worry them; in fact, they were relieved to find such an easy path, for the mountains had by now assumed alarming proportions, and they realized that, but for the telephone wire which showed them the way into the ravine, they would have found themselves faced with an obstacle beyond their power to cross.

In the shade offered by the towering sides of the gorge they made good progress, and a fresh turn showed them that they had nearly reached the highest point. In their anxiety to see over the great watershed they hurried forward, but just before they reached the top they pulled up with one accord as a distant sound was wafted to their ears. They looked at each other expectantly, for it was the hum of an aeroplane.

Biggles turned and raced to the summit, for the walls on either side of them restricted their field of view, and on reaching it turned about and looked back over the plain whence came the sound.

'There he is!' cried Ginger, pointing to a speck in the distance.

It 's the Dragon,' exclaimed Algy as, notwithstanding the distance, his eyes picked out the familiar outline.

'Leroux on his way home,' said Biggles. 'Keep under cover; at the height he's flying he will pass over us very low, and we don't want him to see us.'

In silence they stood and watched the aeroplane approach, roar past a few hundred feet over their heads, and then rapidly diminish in size as it sped on over the unknown country ahead. They were still watching it when the roar of the engine died away suddenly and the machine began to lose height.

'He 's going down,' said Biggles. 'That leaves us in little doubt as to the position of Karuli.'

The machine was still in the air when it faded into the haze, but was losing height quickly, and they knew that their objective was not much more than a day's march.

The subject of their attention having disappeared, they dropped their eyes to the country over which they would have to pass, and for some minutes they regarded its wild splendour with admiration. It was, broadly speaking, what is usually described as 'rolling'

country : that is, undulating in rather a big way; and whereas the plain behind them had been arid in the real sense of the word, the new panorama on which they gazed was fertile ; the herbage was a soft green, and from it rose magnificent trees, singly and in clumps, like the timber in an English park. The reason for such a striking contrast was clearly visible, for coiling across the landscape in mighty sweeps was a broad river. In a general way its course was from north to south, so that it formed as it were a dividing line between the mountains and the fertile country beyond. Indeed, so close to the mountains did it come in one of its serpentine detours that it actually disappeared from view near the foot of the elevation on which the three airmen stood looking down with questioning eyes, to reappear some distance farther on.

'We shan't be short of water again, that's evident,' remarked Biggles, looking down at the river. On the contrary, it looks as if there might be more than we want. We've got to cross that river to get to Karuli, and while a bath wouldn't do any of us any harm, in a country famous for its crocodiles, hippos, and other nuisances, I'd prefer to take mine in a nice enamelled tub. By James! Stampoulos tucked himself away all right while he was about it, didn't he ? If he'd searched the whole of Africa—which he may have done for all we know—he couldn't have found a more inaccessible spot, a place less likely to be visited by any one. On this

side he is protected by a waterless plain, a range of mountains, and a river; on the other side by the Congo Basin which, from what I've

heard of it, is pretty well impassable. No wonder he used air transport. We should never have got across these mountains if we hadn't struck the pass.' He broke off and glanced back at the towering crags. As he did so his eyes went round with astonishment. 'Great Scott! Look at all this,' he exclaimed.

The others turned quickly and beheld an extraordinary sight. In a wide semicircle amongst the mighty granite crags and boulders was a vast assembly of baboons. Some, most of them females, judging by the youngsters they held in their arms, were sitting still, but others were moving steadily forward with their almost-human eyes fixed on the intruders. Observing that they had been seen, some of these began to voice their indignation by uttering short, sharp barks.

Ginger laughed, for the spectacle was not without humour, and it was plain from their manner as they stood watching that not one of them suspected that they were in danger.

Then one of the baboons, an enormous creature that might have been the leader of the colony, ran forward, chattering with rage and showing its teeth viciously. Instantly, as if it were a signal for a general advance, many of the others began to move forward quickly, leaping from rock to rock with amazing agility.

The expression on Biggles's face changed and he began to back away. 'Let 's get out of this,' he snapped. 'I believe these brutes mean trouble. Algy, turn round with me and face them; Ginger, watch the path and tell us if there are any bad places. Look out! Mind your head!'

The last warning came as a result of an unexpected action on the part of the leader of the apes. It had seized a piece of rock and, with unbelievable ferocity, sent it hurtling down towards the now rapidly retreating airmen. It was followed by a dozen others, and presently the side of the mountain was alive with leaping rocks of all sizes.

Biggles abandoned all pretence at finesse. 'Tun for it!' he yelled. 'If one of those rocks hits any of us it will mean broken bones at least.'

In something not far removed from panic they set off down the path at a speed which normally they would have regarded as suicidal, for it began to fall away steeply and sheer drops of several feet were common. At one such place, where they could only scramble down one at a time, Biggles

whirled round, and seeing that the apes were still following, whipped out his automatic and let drive at the leader. The range was too long



for accurate shooting, and the bullets missed their mark, but they made a startling noise as they ricocheted off the rocks, and the apes, who seemed to be fully aware of the danger, slowed down.

'Keep going,' panted Biggles as he raced on after the others.

The ravine had now broken down into com-paratively open hill-side although the path was still clearly defined ; in fact, there were places where rough steps had been hewn in the granite.

A glance backward showed that the apes were still following, but they had dropped a good way behind and it was clear that the immediate danger was past.

don't think they'll follow us much farther now that they see we're going,' muttered Biggles, wip-ing his forehead with his handkerchief. 'We'd better not stop, though. What a swine of a place this is. What will be next, I wonder ?'

He was soon to know

Breathing heavily, knuckles and shins barked by the swift descent over the rough rock, they reached the level of the river and, turning a corner, saw it almost at their feet, the near side actually washing the rocks on which they stood.

Biggles pulled up with a cry of dismay, looking anxiously from left to right, for although the telephone wire spanned the river, secured on each side by heavy posts, there was no bridge, and the river was a good fifty yards wide.

Without speaking, they walked on until they reached the edge of the water.

It looks as if we shall have to swim, after all,' observed Algy.

Biggles picked up a piece of loose rock and threw it at what appeared to be a strip of bark floating down the middle of the river. There were several such strips. It submerged instantly, leaving a line of bubbles to mark the place where it had been.

I'm not swimming in that river,' he declared emphatically. 'I'd sooner go back and face the apes. But surely there must be some way across, or the path wouldn't be here.

People—those warriors we saw, for instance—must use it. They must have come this way. I've got it! There must be a boat.'

It's probably over on the other side,' suggested Algy pessimistically.

'No, I won't have that,' replied Biggles warmly.

'Stampoulos and his dart-throwers we know are over this side, so assuming they crossed here, the boat must be over this side, too. We shall have to look for it.'

He was quite right; there was a boat, but it took them half an hour to find it, and even then it could hardly be called a boat. Actually, it was a dug-out canoe of the most primitive sort, being merely a hollowed-out tree-trunk with the ends shaped roughly to points. Moreover, it was rotten, with the freeboard broken down in places almost to the water's edge.

They found it in a peculiar place some distance below the point where the path ended by the river. At the particular spot where they discovered it, lying half in and half out of the water, the river actually flowed through a rift in the foot-hills of the mountains, so that not only was there a steep rocky bank on the side on which they stood, but the wall on the other side was even steeper, making a direct crossing impossible. The distance to the place where the wall broke down again and became the usual reed-fringed bank was not great, but this was in the direction from which they had come, and therefore up-stream.

How far it was before the bank occurred again down-stream they had no means of knowing, for a bend hid it from view ; nor could they, owing to the interruption of an unscalable cliff, work their way along to a point from which they would be able to see how far they would have to travel that way before they could effect a landing.

For this reason Biggles hesitated after they had tilted the water out of the crazy craft and re-launched it. He eyed the current, which, owing to the narrowing of the river caused by the rocks, was fairly fast, with disfavour. 'Well, which is it to be, up-stream or down ?' he asked, unable to make up his mind.

'We shall make slow headway against that current if we try to go up-stream,' declared Algy, 'and this tub leaks like a sieve. I say let 's go down.'

'What about carrying the boat higher up and going straight across,'

suggested Ginger.

'That 's a good idea,' agreed Biggles.

It was, and they attempted to put it into execution, only to abandon the project at once when they found that not by their united strength could they lift the water-soaked craft.

'It 's no use,' muttered Biggles disgustedly. 'It would need a dozen men to carry it.'

He picked up the crude paddle and, not without

difficulty, they took their places—Algy in the bows, Ginger in the middle, and Biggles in the stern. At first they turned the nose upstream, but the difficulty of making progress combined with the waywardness of the dug-out, which, not being dead straight, went in any direction but the one desired, caused Biggles to change his mind, and as the nose swung he allowed it to come right round until it pointed downstream, when forward progress became easier.

It was not long before they had an escort. It took the shape of a crocodile which appeared suddenly on the surface of the water a few yards away and watched them malevolently with cold, unwinking eyes. As they passed it turned and followed them.

Algy and Ginger watched it with a sort of fascinated horror.

'Can't you put a bit more beef behind that paddle ?' muttered Algy impatiently. 'I don't like the look of that customer.'

'If I push any harder the confounded boat will turn over,' answered Biggles shortly. '

Keep your hands in the boat, both of you.'

Another crocodile appeared, then another and another until the water was literally swarming with

them. The canoe rounded the bend, only to face another one fifty yards farther on, so it was now impossible to land on either side of the gulch.

They all turned pale as one of the saurians deliberately pushed its nose against the side of the canoe, causing it to rock and ship water through one of the gaps in the freeboard ; and Ginger did not help to

keep the boat steady by reaching for his automatic.

Tut that thing away, you fool,' grated Biggles harshly. 'Wound one, and one swish of its tail would sink us—Ah! you swine!' He raised the paddle out of the water and shifted it over to the other side as one of the crocodiles made a grab at it.

Thereafter, the going, short as it was, became a nightmare of horror that none of them could ever recall without a shudder. They passed through a pool that seemed to be the head-quarters of all the crocodiles in Africa, and they surged about the canoe in a manner that made disaster seem only a matter of seconds. Yet somehow they managed to keep it afloat, and it swerved sideways round the bend to reveal the end of the rock on the far bank only a short distance away. At the same moment the dug-out quivered as if a giant rasp had been drawn across the keel, and instinctively a cry broke from Ginger's lips.

'Keep your head, everybody,' snapped Biggles. 'We're nearly there.'

With agonizing slowness the canoe drifted towards the bank, with Biggles making quick strokes with the paddle as occasion offered, for the crocodiles were now making regular attempts to seize it and pull it into the water.

'Take it gently when we ground,' warned Biggles. 'If any one tries jumping out we shall capsize.'

Several crocodiles were on the bank, but they all ran down to the water when they saw the canoe approaching. The surge they made as they plunged in caused the water to pour over the side of the canoe, and it began to sink bodily. Realizing the desperateness of the situation, Biggles risked everything on one final effort. He thrust the blade of the paddle deep into the water and hurled his weight behind it. He nearly went overboard as it was torn from his hands, but the stroke had had the desired effect, and the nose of the frail vessel swished softly into the muddy bank. 'Out you go, Ginger,' he cried.

Algy leapt ashore just as the canoe sank, but the water was shallow and the others found themselves

standing only a little more than knee-deep. A splashing rush and they, too, were on the bank, pale and trembling, while a line of cold eyes watched them from the river.

Biggles passed his hand wearily over his face. 'I've had just about as

much of this sort of thing as I can stand,' he murmured.

'Are you telling me ?' sighed Ginger weakly. 'I shall dream of this for the rest of my life.'

'Well, let's see where we are,' said Biggles quietly, and ran to the top of the bank.

Reaching it, he fell back a pace, staring, and there he stood while the others joined him.

Before them, not more than a hundred yards away, was a native village of low, reed-built, conical-shaped huts. From it came a shrill cry of alarm. A crowd of warriors armed with spears and clubs poured out of the huts and charged, yelling, towards the new-comers.

Ginger's hand flew to his pocket.

'No use, laddie,' said Biggles sadly, shaking his head. 'We can't fight that mob, so it 's no use irritating them. We shall do better by trying to appear friendly, I think.'

## CHAPTER XIV

### ORDEAL BY FIRE

ANY hope they entertained in that direction, however, was squashed with such speed and violence as to leave them breathless and flabbergasted. Indeed, with such ferocity was the onslaught against them carried out that in his heart Biggles felt certain that the end had come ; for the natives, far from stopping a few yards away as he anticipated, dashed right in, seized them, and flung them to the ground in a manner that was as violent as it was unexpected. Their hands were tied behind them, and they were conducted—dragged would perhaps be a better word—to a hut and flung inside.

Algy rolled over on to his side and then struggled into a sitting position. He looked at Biggles reproachfully. 'We ought to have plugged some of the skunks,' he said bitterly.

'We should all have been dead by now if we had; as full of spears as a hedgehog is of quills,' Biggles told him coolly.

'I had an idea that the natives of Africa had all been tamed by now, but I must be wrong,'

observed Algy.

'It almost looks like it, doesn't it ?' agreed Biggles sarcastically.

'What is their idea, do you suppose ?'

'Goodness knows. I can't make it out. There 's something funny about this attack ; I'm sure these people wouldn't behave like this in the ordinary way. Look out, here comes the head lad.'

A shadow had fallen across the low doorway and a moment later two natives entered the hut. Both were remarkable in appearance and equally repulsive. The first, who was evidently the chief of the tribe, was a man of great stature, but he was fat to the point of bestiality. He was jet black, with short curly hair and a broad face on which a tiny snub nose with gaping nostrils looked ridiculously inadequate. His eyes were small, red-rimmed as if from disease, and set close together, while his neck would have carried the head of a buffalo. With the two front claws fastened over one shoulder, a magnificent leopard skin was draped across his body, caught in round the waist by the beast's tail.

This appeared to be his only garment.

The other was a little wizened old man whose wrinkled face—or what they could see of it—betokened a tremendous age. Above his head, fixed so that it rose above his face, was a mask of indescribable ugliness, while about his body, in chains, festoons, and garlands, hung an incredible assortment of articles varying from old tin lids to human bones and the teeth of animals.

A filthy skirt of coloured grasses hung down from his waist, completing a picture at which the three airmen gazed in loathing and disgust. They knew enough of Africa to be aware that he was a witch-doctor.

'There 's getting a King Solomon's Mines touch about this business,' observed Algy, with a courageous attempt at humour.

To this Biggles made no reply, but looking the chief straight in the eyes he asked, 'Do either of you speak English ?'

The chief did not answer, but the witch-doctor broke into what sounded like a stream of vituperation, waving his hands to emphasize his remarks. The noise was not unlike the chattering of an angry monkey.

Apparently they don't,' said Biggles quietly. 'I'm afraid it 's going to be a bit difficult if we can't discuss the matter with them.'

That such was the case was soon made clear, for after staring at the prisoners for some minutes the chief withdrew, and the witch-doctor, after removing the one or two odds and ends they carried' in their pockets, followed him. Hip-pockets were evidently unknown to him for he overlooked these, so the prisoners were left in possession of their automatics, although as their hands were securely bound they were unable to get at them.

Biggles looked at Algy's wrists and saw that the bonds were strips of green hide, and he knew at once that their chances of being able to free themselves were remote. Still, they could but try, he decided, and was about to roll over in order to attack Algy's with his teeth when a warrior appeared and squatted down in the doorway, watching them closely.

If that scallywag is going to sit there all the time it's going to be hard to get away,' said Algy, eyeing the new-comer vindictively.

'He is, you can bet your boots on that,' replied Biggles.

Outside a drum began beating fitfully ; presently it was answered by another far away.

Nothing more was said. Utterly helpless, they could only sit and wait what might befall.

Slowly the day wore on. Once or twice there was an excited clamour outside as if something unusual was occurring, but they were left in ignorance as to what it was. They were given neither food nor water, and they all suffered intensely from thirst and from the attentions of myriads of flies from whose attacks they were powerless to defend themselves.

It was nearing sunset when from outside there came a babble of excited voices, the clamour increasing in volume as if those responsible for it were approaching the but in which the prisoners lay.

It sounds as if something might happen shortly,' observed Biggles.

I hope it does; anything is better than this,' growled Algy. 'If only I could get to my gun I'd give these swine something to yell about.'

A moment later a black form blocked out the light and another visitor entered. They all recognized him at once. It was the leader of the party of warriors who had accosted them while they were repairing the Puss Moth, and he showed his teeth in a flashing grin of satisfaction as he looked down upon them.

'You no talk so big now,' he said boastfully, pricking Biggles's leg viciously with the point of his spear.

'Where 's your master ?' asked Biggles, ignoring the thrust, thinking that if the white man was

about, even if he were an enemy, he could not have so far lost caste as to leave fellow white men to their fate at the hands of savages.

'He no come here,' grinned the native. 'By time he come, two day, three day, you say so-long. My friends outside get much money, much bacca, much beef, much poshi, for catching you. You no more shoot at black mans; crocodiles see you finish.' With an ironic smile the man went out.

Presumably he said something to the crowd that had assembled outside, for an absolute bedlam of jeers and shouting broke out. Nor did it cease. Indeed, as darkness fell the pandemonium became indescribable, the clanging of tins and the banging of drums adding to the uproar.

'I should like to make just one small contribution to that din, and that's the good healthy rattle of a machine-gun,' snarled Biggles, as if he could stand it no longer.

'What do you think they mean to do to us ?. asked Ginger.

'I shouldn't think about that if I were you,' Biggles told him grimly.

'What about trying to free my hands with your teeth ?' suggested Algy. 'There doesn't seem to be

anybody on door duty now, and if there was he couldn't see us.'

'At this stage anything is worth trying,' replied Biggles, and turning over on to his side he began gnawing the thongs. He knew it was hopeless from the start, for his teeth could make no impression on the tough hide which, quite apart from anything else, tasted foul, and the smell of it nearly made him sick. 'No use,' he muttered at last, turning away and spitting. 'My stomach will stand a lot, but not the smell of



that stuff.'

Outside, the darkness was suddenly dispelled by an orange glare as if a fire had been lighted ; it crept through the open doorway and bathed the faces of the prisoners with a lurid glow.

'Looks as if it's getting time for the balloon to go up,' observed Algy philosophically.

'Yes, the fireworks have started,' agreed Biggles. 'Sorry I've got you fellows into this jam.'

'I can't see that you've got us into it,' murmured Ginger. 'I've only one regret, and that is that Stampoulos and Leroux look like getting away with their graft now, and poor old Marton won't see his son again. I'm afraid we haven't much hope.'

'You never know,' declared Biggles, with a

conviction that he was far from feeling. 'While there 's life there 's hope is an old saying, and the more you think about it the more patent becomes the truth of it. When you're dead it 's the finish, but until then anything can happen. This isn't the first time I've thought I was sunk, but somehow I've always managed to bob up again.'

'Well, it 's nice of you to cheer us up this way,' replied Algy. 'Can you think of anything that might save us at this juncture ?'

'A herd of mad elephants might charge the village,' suggested Biggles.

'Is there such a thing, do you think ?' asked Ginger hopefully.

'Since you force me to say it, I must admit that I've never heard of one,' confessed Biggles. 'There might be an earthquake or a cloudburst, though.'

'Either of which would put paid to our account just as effectively as the stiffs outside,'

declared Algy. 'Why pretend ? Let us face our end with the cold, calm philosophy of our race, as they say in books,' he added sarcastically. 'Frankly, if they take us to that crocodile pool I shall scream my head off. I

Oh, shut up,' snapped Biggles. 'Here comes the

procession, anyway,' he went on quickly as the uproar approached the hut.

Several natives entered. The prisoners were hauled into the open, dragged to their feet, and marched towards an open space in the centre of the village, where the entire population had collected in a circle round three posts that had been let into the ground near a dais on which sat the chief. To these posts the prisoners were led; their hands were untied, and then retied behind the posts.

'Judging from the audience, I should say that this is what in film circles is called a premiere,' observed Algy, looking round.

Suddenly the uproar died away ; a hush fell upon the scene, and the air was tense with expectation.

'Here comes Father Christmas to do his stuff,' muttered Biggles, looking towards the far side of the circle where a gangway had opened through the spectators.

It was the witch-doctor, clad presumably in his full robes of office. The mask which he had worn earlier in the day had been replaced by another even more monstrous, a ghastly effigy of a crocodile. The head, with gaping jaws, protruded far in front of his face, while the skin hung down his back until the tail dragged along the ground.

This apparition did not walk straight towards the prisoners, but commenced to make short zigzag rushes to and fro, the end of each rush bringing it a little nearer.

suppose we've got to put up with all this tomfoolery,' growled Algy.

Of course,' answered Biggles. 'The boys must have their fun.'

From somewhere in the folds of his equipment the witch-doctor now produced a short, ivory-handled assagai, and at the same time a dreadful noise that was something between a howl and a scream broke from his lips, the high note being accompanied by a fierce thrust with the assagai at an imaginary enemy.

Slowly but surely he drew nearer. The howls became more spasmodic and the spear thrusts more vicious. A low mutter ran round the spectators, but it died away again to a breathless silence as they saw that the witch-doctor's last rush had carried him to within a few yards of Ginger. There was a noise like wind rustling in dry leaves as two hundred throats drew a deep breath. The witchdoctor's hand went

back, assagai poised.



The witch-doctor's last rush had carried him to within a few yards of Ginger

Simultaneously a sudden outcry of voices occurred on the far side of the assembly, and several natives began running across the open space shouting as they ran. The witchdoctor swung round and screamed as if infuriated at this interruption, but the natives, although they kept clear of him, continued to run. Others joined them. The chief jumped

down from his seat and shouted something at the witch-doctor, who turned and ran with a speed that was extraordinary for one so encumbered. In a few seconds the break-up became a panic which ended in a wild stampede, and within a minute there was not a single native in sight.

`Looks as if that herd of mad elephants is coming after all,' whispered Ginger, through dry lips.

`Something 's coming, that's certain,' muttered Biggles, staring at the point where the stampede started.

Presently it came. Out of the darkness into the ruddy glow of the fire marched a double line of uniformed men. They were black, but they walked smartly, with military precision, and at their head, in khaki drill tunic, shorts, and a topee, strode a white man with a walking-stick in his hand.

Biggles took one look at the red fezzes, bando-

Tiers, and rifles carried at the slope. `Askaris, by all that 's wonderful,' he breathed.

In military step the party marched across the open space to where the three airmen stood watching them with thankful eyes. At a distance of a few yards the officer halted his men and advanced alone, a jack-knife in his hand.

`Looks as if I've arrived at what is called the crucial moment,' he observed with a curious smile, as he severed in turn the raw-hide thongs that held the prisoners to their posts.

`Yes! Believe me, we're pleased to see you,' smiled Biggles.

`And I'm pleased to see you.' The officer glanced up. 'My name is Collison, Seventeenth African Rifles. You're Bigglesworth, I suppose ?'

`Yes, that's my name,' answered Biggles wonderingly.

`Then I arrest you for the wilful murder of Luke Sarda, at Insula, on or about the twelfth of the present month,' said the officer curtly.

Biggles stared at him incredulously for a full ten seconds without speaking. Then a queer, half-hysterical laugh broke from his lips.

`It seems to strike you as funny,' said Collison icily.

'Funny!' Biggles laughed again. 'I think that 's just about the best joke I ever heard in my life,' he said simply. 'By the way, if you've got any water handy we could do with a drink.'

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## CHAPTER XV

### BIGGLES SPEAKS

'AND now,' continued Collison, when they had all drunk deeply, 'I'm not altogether lacking in a sense of humour, so perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me just where the joke comes in. From my point of view, I found nothing amusing in having to tear myself and my men across that infernal plain in the heat of the day, but we knew it was going to be touch and go whether we got here in time.'

'How did you know that ?' asked Biggles.

'The drums told us.'

'And I suppose that's how you knew we were here in the first place ?'

'Of course. Every native within a hundred miles knows that three strange white men are in Limshoda.'

'Is that the name of this village ?'

'It is. You'd have done well to avoid it: it 's got a nasty reputation.'

'We didn't even know it was here, much less know about its reputation,' Biggles told him frankly. 'Are you in a great hurry to push on anywhere to-night ?'

'No, we shall have to spend the night here; my men need a rest.'

'So do we, for that matter,' answered Biggles. 'I'm glad, because I should like to have a few words of conversation with you.'

'I want a few words with you, too, although it is my duty to warn you that anything you may say may be used as evidence against you.'

'That sounds like good old solid English to me,'

grinned Biggles. 'Let 's find a place to sit down.' 'Are you going to give me your parole?'

`No, I certainly am not.'

I warn you that if you attempt to escape my men will

`That 's the last thing I'm thinking about at the moment,' interrupted Biggles. 'Tor one thing I'm far too tired. All the same, I won't give my parole —not until we've had a chat, anyway. Shall we go to one of the huts ?'

If you knew as much about native huts as I do you wouldn't willingly go within a mile of one,' declared Collison. 'Let 's sit by the fire ; the smoke will help to keep the mosquitoes away.'

They walked across to where the fire was beginning to settle down into a heap of glowing embers. Beside it, for it was too large for them to sit round it, they sat, or rather squatted, on stools that some of the Askaris fetched from the huts.

I suppose I may assume that you've been to Insula ?' inquired Biggles.

`You may assume what you like, Bigglesworth,' Collison answered curtly. 'But you're here to answer questions, not to ask them.'

All right, there 's no need to be provocative,' replied Biggles quietly. 'We shall both get farther and fare better by maintaining friendly relations than we shall by getting at loggerheads. And let me say this. I realize that your present attitude towards us is in keeping with your instructions, or, in case you are acting on your own initiative, the charge that you have preferred against us. But don't ask me to believe that you've stumbled into this business by accident. Now! The sooner I am able to convince you that you are on the wrong tack, the better will be our chance of winding up successfully the business that brought us to Africa, and the better will be your chance of doing yourself and your regiment a bit of good. So I suggest that either I give you the facts about this affair, or alternatively I'll answer any questions you like; but it will save time if I tell you the story. We've nothing to hide.'

I've only one question to ask,' put in Collison. `Did you kill Sarda ?'

I did,' replied Biggles.

`No you didn't, I did,' cried Ginger.

`Very well, let us say that we did,' suggested Biggles.

`Then that's all I want to know,' said Collison briefly.

`Maybe its all you want to know, but there are a lot of other things you ought to know, and a lot of things you've thundering well got to know,' declared Biggles coldly. 'If I'm right in my judgement, the information you hold was furnished by one man. It's his word against ours. Now look, Collison: I've been a soldier. I was a soldier while you were a kid squealing in a cradle, so I'm not ignorant of military procedure. If you're going to take things for granted because a renegade Frenchman shot a cock-and-bull story into your ear, you're heading for a court martial. This is a bigger thing than you imagine. I'm not threatening, but by the Lord Harry, I've been through too much to stand for any nonsense, from you or any one else.'

At the word 'Frenchman' Collison started. `What do you know about —?'

`Leroux ? More than you do. His real name isn't Leroux, for a start, and he'll be doing a ten years' stretch when this show is finished. I suppose he went and saw you at Juba ?'

`Malakal.'

It doesn't matter where. He told you about Sarda, and sent you off after us. Gave you a lift to Insula to hurry things up, as likely as not.'

`Matter of fact, he did, in his aeroplane.'

Our aeroplane, you mean. Or, to be absolutely accurate, Mr. Marton's aeroplane. That machine was bought by Mr. Felix Marton, of Birmingham, to enable us to search for his son.'

Collison stared. 'Do you mean that you're here looking for young Marton, the boy who disappeared on a Cape flight a year or so ago ?'

`Yes, that's why we're here.'

`Can you prove that ?'

Easily, but it will take a few hours. The documents referring to the matter, with my log-book and small kit, are in my kit-bag at an emergency landing-ground a few miles to the east of this place. We hid them when we pushed on here. If you care to send a couple of runners to collect it and bring it here give you my parole until they come back.'

'Whose was that crashed aeroplane I saw there ? We came that way, of course.'

'Harry Marton's, but he didn't crash it. It was stolen by the man who calls himself Leroux.'

Collison's manner changed as he grew interested. 'Stolen ? What on earth for ?'

Tor one of two reasons. Either because Marton had tumbled on the secret activities of a firm, with head-quarters in Cairo, for whom Leroux acts as pilot, or because Leroux wanted the aeroplane the better to pursue those activities.'

'And what are these activities—do you know ?'

'Dope running. The biggest dope racket that any one has ever run in the Middle East is operating between Karuli and Cairo.'

Collison stared. 'What is the dope ?'

'Hashish?'

1 Hashish is an insidious drug used widely in Egypt and the Far East, where it is called bhang, or Indian hemp. Produced chiefly in Greece, it is smuggled in large quantities into Egypt where it is in great demand in spite of the vigilance of the special officers whose duty it is to combat the traffic. The history of the tricks that have been employed to smuggle the drug into the country would fill a volume. Most of the big men in the 'trade'

are Europeans, chiefly Greeks and Armenians, although the actual distributors are natives. To a vast number of Egyptians hashish is what tobacco is to other races, and while the demand for it exists no doubt unscrupulous It was some seconds before Collison spoke. 'Are you pulling my leg ?' he asked suspiciously.

'I certainly am not. This is no time for leg-pulling. Do I look as though I should be likely to waste time talking rubbish ?'

'But why didn't you report this to the authorities ?'

'Because I've only just discovered what is going on. You see, when I was last at that landing-ground on the other side of the plain, I was standing by the crash when I caught a whiff of an aroma that reminded me of something, something that I had smelt once before.



You know how the memory of a smell will persist for ages, and can bring back a scene as nothing else will. At the time I couldn't remember what the smell was, or what it reminded me of. Lacey and I once had a spot of trouble with a Greek in the Red Sea; curiously enough his name was Stampoulos, and he may be the same man for all I know, although it isn't an uncommon Greek name. I saw some hashish then, and just now the whole thing came back to me.\* That Puss Moth which you saw crashed there has been used

traffickers will risk imprisonment for the large sums of money successful smuggling produces.

I See 'The Sheikh and the Greek' in the book of short stories entitled Biggles Flies Again.

for a year by Leroux, and the inside of the three-ply luggage compartment smells of hashish. Go and smell it for yourself if you don't believe me.'

'But what about young Marton? What happened to him—do you know that ?'

'I believe he is within ten miles of us at this moment, a prisoner on Stampoulos's alleged tobacco plantation—which I suspect isn't tobacco at all, but the hemp from which hashish is made.'

'Good heavens!'

'You may well look shaken.'

'I think you'd better tell me the whole story,' suggested Collison.

'Certainly,' answered Biggles willingly, and he related the events that had occurred since their arrival at Insula. 'Now look here, Collison,' he went on quickly, when he had finished, 'I know you've only got my word for all this, but I can soon furnish proof if you still feel you need it. Don't lose sight of the fact, though, that we are within an ace of finding Harry Marton, and, frankly, that's all we're concerned with. From your point of view the hashish business is, no doubt, a much bigger thing. Well, you can take all the kudos that may be coming on that account. I want Harry Marton, that's all, and I'm going to get him, with or without your consent. To waste time now would be fatal. If once Stampoulos and his crowd get wind of what 's happened here to-night, or learn that we are talking together, they'll get into my machine and fly away ; and they won't come back. Either that or they'll get rid of everything incriminating that may be about. Either

way, Harry Marton will disappear for ever.'

'What do you suggest ?'

I suggest that first of all you send a couple of your men off to fetch our kit-bags; then, that you give us—that is, Lacey, Hebblethwaite, and myself—full rein for twenty-four hours. You can come with us and watch us if you like. At the end of that time, whether we are successful or not, we'll report back to you. You can have my parole on that. That lets you out if we are mistaken—not that I think there is any likelihood of that. Frankly, I should feel happier if you would row in with us, but I see the drawbacks to that from your point of view. If there was any trouble—shooting, for instance—and our plans went wrong, you'd be in the cart when you went back to your head-quarters for letting us go.

But don't forget this. I'm not going to attempt to apprehend Stampoulos or Leroux. As long as I get young Marton and my Dragon

they can go on growing hashish, and eating it if they like, until they're blue in the face.

That's not my affair. I don't feel inclined to lumber myself up with prisoners, or hang about Africa for weeks waiting for the trial to come on. But I'll do this. You throw in your lot with us and we'll go for a clean sweep—work together for a complete roundup.

Then, if we get away with it, I'll take Marton and you can have the hashish crowd. I'll give you a written statement describing how Sarda met his death if you like, or I'll come back to Africa in person and tell the story to a jury. Now make up your mind, for there's no time to be lost.'

'What would be your plan if I agreed to this ?'

'Go straight to Karuli just as soon as we've had a bite of food and settle the whole thing one way or the other.'

Inspired by Biggles's enthusiasm, Collison was on his feet in a moment. 'I'm your man,'

he said, offering his hand. 'I think I know a true story when I hear one. Between ourselves, I didn't like the look of that fellow Leroux, but as you must see, I was bound to follow the thing up.'

Of course you were,' agreed Biggles emphati-

cally. 'Are you going to take command, or am I ?'

I suggest that we all go to Karuli together.

When we get there we can scout round and decide on the best course. I shall have to have proof before I Harry Marton will supply you with all the evidence you'll need if we can get hold of him,' declared Biggles grimly. 'Find us a biscuit or two and a tin of bully, and we'll be ready to trek just as soon as you are.'

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE ROUND-UP

TWENTY minutes later the column was on the march, the four white men walking in front and the askaris in file behind. In scouting round the village for signs of the evacuated natives they had found a path leading in the direction of Karuli, so there was no danger of losing the way. Smoking had been forbidden, and the passage of the party was almost as stealthy as that of the wild beasts that occasionally crossed their path.

For two hours the party marched, and then a small cluster of lights ahead told them that they were nearing their destination. Thereafter the party moved with extra caution, the order 'no talking' being passed from man to man down the column, and they were not more than a quarter of a mile away from the lights when Collison gave the order to halt.

'Have you any idea of the lay-out of this place ?' Biggles asked him in a whisper.

'Not the remotest,' was the answer. 'What 's your idea of the best plan of procedure ?'

Biggles thought for a moment, eyeing the lights

speculatively. 'I'll tell you what I think,' he said quietly. 'If we all go forward, and anything happens to warn them of our approach, they'll clean everything up by the time we get there—including Marton. As likely as not they'll try to do the same thing if you walk straight up to the place, whether we are with you or not, for they can hardly refuse you admission. That in itself would look fishy. At the same time, it's a bit difficult for you as a serving officer in an official capacity to go snooping about the place like a spy ; I mean, you'd look a bit cheap if

they caught you at it. With us it would be altogether different. I suggest therefore that you detail all your men except one or two to surround the place. We will then go forward and reconnoitre. If there is anything to report, we'll come back and let you know. If you hear any shooting, or anything in the nature of a rough house, you can hurry along to the bungalow—or whatever it is—at the same time blowing your whistle for your men to close in. At present our great advantage lies in the fact that our presence here must be absolutely unsuspected.'

'How many people are there likely to be in the bungalow, do you think ?' asked Collison.

'I've no idea,' admitted Biggles. 'It's almost

certain that Leroux is there because we watched him land here this morning. There is a Greek, who may be Stampoulos, about somewhere, but the last we saw of him was at Insula. Whether he 's got back or not I don't know, but I should think it 's quite likely if he managed to get across the river.'

'What do you mean? There 's no difficulty about that.'

'We had an awful time getting across this morning in that ramshackle canoe.'

'Why use the canoe ? That was abandoned long ago. There's a flying bridge.'

'What's that ?'

'A kind of flat punt affair that goes to and fro on a wire ; there 's a rope on it so that whichever side of the river you happen to arrive at you can pull it over to you.'

'We didn't see it.'

'Possibly you wouldn't unless you knew it was there because it is some distance above the pass.'

'I see. Well, never mind that now; what do you think of my idea ? Shall I take my party for a look round ?'

'I think it's a sound scheme. I'd like to come

with you, but I see your point about keeping out of the way for the

time being.'

Àll right, then; we'll get off. If you hear nothing, wait until we return ; if there's a row, come along at the double.'

`That 's clear. Off you go, then.'

Biggles touched Algy and Ginger lightly on the arm. 'Come on, chaps. This should be the last act,' he added quietly as he glided away into the darkness in the direction of the lights.

He pulled up in the dark shadow of a tree at a point where the open veld gave way to cultivated country, and beckoned the others to come nearer. `We've got to watch our step,' he said quietly. `Remember, we're not alone; we have Collison to consider, which doesn't give us quite the same freedom as we are accustomed to. Still, it 's useless to say what we may or may not do until we see how the land lies. The landing-ground must be on the other side of that building, which I take to be the bungalow,' he went on, peering into the darkness. `The lamps are still alight, so Stampoulos and Co. haven't yet gone to bed although it must be getting late. We mustn't waste time; the lights may go out at any moment, and I'd sooner arrive while they are alight because we shall stand a better chance of learning something. Have your guns handy, but don't for heaven's sake use them unless it becomes absolutely necessary.'

They walked on again, only to stop once more while Biggles examined the crops that now appeared on either side of the path.

`What is it ?' breathed Algy, as Biggles fingered the broad leaves of one of the plants that grew in seried ranks as far as they could see.

Ìt's tobacco all right, there's no doubt about that,' was the mystified answer. 'Stand fast,'

added Biggles, and walked several yards into the growth. He was soon back. 'Cunning devils,' he almost hissed. 'There 's something else growing in the middle which I take to be hemp ; the tobacco round the edges of the field is merely camouflage.'

In silence they crept nearer to the lights that marked the position of the bungalow, and as they drew nearer it became possible to see the dark silhouette of other buildings near at hand. One, a large one, particularly attracted Biggles's attention, and he made his way towards it cautiously.

Another few paces and the crops ended abruptly, leaving them facing a vast, open area, silent and mysterious in the dim starlight, on the edge of which stood the building.

'Here 's the aerodrome, and that, I fancy, is the hangar,' breathed Biggles. 'Watch out, there may be a guard.'

They saw no one, however, and it took them only a few minutes to confirm that the building was, in fact, a reed-built hangar like the one at Insula. Moreover, the Dragon was inside with her tanks filled ready for flight, a condition that Biggles ascertained while the others remained on guard. He also found something else, something that gave him a thrill of elation when he discovered it. In the cabin were a number of neat packages, each marked with a number.

'We could get away now if we wanted to,' he murmured, as he rejoined the others. 'In the ordinary way all we should have to do would be to find Marton, but as things are we've got to stay and help Collison to clean up. Let 's go and have a look at the bungalow.'

In single file they began to walk quietly towards the building, from which three shafts of yellow light lit up the bare earth outside. From it came the sound of voices, one raised high as if in anger. At the same time a low murmur became audible from another building some distance farther on, a long, low structure, the roof of which was illuminated from time to time by a flickering orange glow, as if a fire were burning somewhere on the other side of it.

'I should say that's the native compound,' breathed Biggles. 'They're bound to employ a lot of labour here, so whatever we do must be done quietly or we shall stir up a hornet's nest.'

Nearer they crept to the bungalow, approaching it from an angle, so that the details of its construction could be seen on two sides. One side, which was, in fact, the end of the building, was in complete darkness, although they could see the black square that marked the position of a window. But the other elevation, which was the front of the house, was ablaze with light which came from three windows. Two were quite small, but the other held their interest, for it ran nearly half the length of the building, and ended at a door, which stood open. So much they could see, although the whole of the front of the house was shaded to some extent by a roof that overhung for several feet, supported at intervals by stout posts, forming the usual shady veranda. As far as they could make out, the room behind it into which the door opened was the main room of the building, for both

the door and the long window commanded a broad view of the path, the plantation, and, to one side, the native compound.

Unfortunately, the door was at the far end of the window from where they stood, and Biggles observed that the only way it could be reached without crossing the front of the big window, and thereby risking discovery, was to go round the dark side of the house.

He might then crawl under one of the smaller windows, the sill of which was about three feet above the level of the veranda, and survey the interior of the room before going on to the door—not that it was by any means certain that he would find it necessary to enter through that particular door.

At this stage his plans were still rather in the air, because he did not know what the men inside were doing. He realized that if they were engaged in some quite harmless occupation it would be in the nature of an anti-climax to walk into the room and make charges which they would certainly deny. In any case, he decided, that was Collison's job. His primary object was to find out if Harry Marton was in the building, and if so, rescue him before any harm could come to him. Nevertheless, a peep into the lighted room was clearly desirable, and with this object in view he edged his way a little to the right in order to get into the dark shadow on the unlighted side of the building.

With the others following him unquestioningly, he crept stealthily towards the wall, approaching it almost at right angles.

It may be that such a small thing as a stone, or a kink in a chain, saved his life, for although he was alert for any emergency, he was certainly not expecting danger from the direction in which it came. The first warning he had of it was a faint chink as if a small piece of metal had dropped upon another. At the time his attention was divided between the dark wall which he was attempting to reach, and the door on the lighted side of the bungalow in case any one came out of it ; for which reason his eyes were fixed at his own level and not on the ground. But at the metallic noise, slight as it was, his eyes switched to the point whence it came, which seemed to be on the ground at the base of the wall. At first, all he could make out was a smallish, black shadow, but as he stared at it, trying to see what it was, it moved, and the movement brought it into a new angle of starlight. As if suddenly illuminated from within, two green orbs of light glowed in the darkness.

He did not wait to see what it was, but instinc-

tively sprang backward, colliding violently with Ginger who was close behind him, and who, caught completely unaware, had no time to avoid him. Clutching at each other to save themselves from falling, neither succeeded, but both went sprawling on the hard ground. Simultaneously, there was a deep-throated snarl, a harsh clang of metal and a loud thud.

Biggles was up in a flash, drawing his gun at the same time, eyes feverishly seeking the cause of the debacle. He saw Algy bending forward, tense as a spring, his right hand out-thrust, and heard his quickly muttered, 'It's all right—don't shoot.'

'What is it ?' Biggles gasped, breathing heavily, for the fall had knocked the wind out of him.

'It's a leopard I think, but it's on a chain,' muttered Algy. 'The chain is fixed to something under the window. The brute sprang at you, but you stepped back just in time. That bang you heard was the chain jerking taut; it pulled the beast up short and threw it on to its back. I wonder it didn't break its neck. It's still there, crouching under the window . . . see it ? We shall have to go another way.'

Biggles stood for a moment watching the animal

while he recovered his breath. 'Are you all right, Ginger ?' he asked.

'Yes, I'm all right.'

'Sorry I barged into you like that, but I had to move quickly.'

'So I noticed.'

'Has any one heard us, do you think, Algy ?'

'I don't think so. I can still hear talking going on inside ; it sounds as if there 's an argument in progress.'

They all went back to the front of the house, keeping in the shadow slightly to one side.

'I'm going to have a look into that room,' declared Biggles. 'Stand still.'

Half a dozen quick steps took him to the edge of the shadow in which they stood, so he dropped on to all fours and crawled quickly to the veranda, taking care to keep below the level of the window. Then, very slowly, he drew himself up until he could see over the sill, and



the sight that met his curious stare caused him to catch his breath sharply.

With his hands tied together and fastened to a hook in the wall was a youth whose pale face he recognized instantly. It was Harry Marton. Standing beside him, with the stock of a jambok in his

right hand and the thongs in the other, was the native who had spoken to them while they had been repairing the Puss Moth, and who, only a few hours ago, had gloated over them as they lay in the but at Limshoda. From the expression on his face he was enjoying himself.

Seated at a small table in the middle of the room with glasses in their hands were two white men. One was Leroux, and the other was the tall man whom they had last seen at Insula. Both were leaning back in long cane chairs, with cigarettes between their fingers, watching the scene. Leroux was speaking.

'We give you something to remember,' he said. 'Go ahead, Chola.'

Biggles waited for no more. At the spectacle before him all the worry and anxiety he had suffered during the past few days seemed to merge into one searing impulse of cold fury that set his nerves tingling and drew his lips back from his teeth in a mirthless grin.

'Come on,' he snapped over his shoulder to the others, and without waiting for them, dashed to the door.

On the threshold he pulled up short, crouching forward, eyes gleaming, his automatic waving

gently like the head of a snake about to strike, as it covered the startled occupants. '

Move!' he snarled. 'Move, one of you! Why don't you move and give me an excuse to blow you in halves, you dirty, crooked rats in white skins I've had to kill better men than you, and my finger's twitching to fill you full of holes for the pleasure of doing it.' He broke off, nostrils quivering, his blazing eyes never leaving the faces of the two white men, who did not move, but sat staring in a wide-eyed amazement that in different circumstances might have been comical. He heard the others just behind him, and took a pace forward into the room.

'Àlgy, cut down that boy,' he rapped out in a voice that was as cold and hard as cracking ice. 'Shoot that black devil if he so much as

winks an eyelid. Ginger, go and hail Captain Collison. As for you,' he continued, to Leroux and Stampoulos, as the others obeyed his instructions, 'you don't know how lucky you are that Collison is here, or anything I have to say to you, which isn't much, would be said with this.' He flicked the muzzle of the automatic. 'Keep your hands on the table, both of you. One false move is all the excuse I need to hand you what you deserve, and I'm praying for you to make it.' He broke off as Collison,



'Move!' he snarled. 'Move, one of you!'

with a file of askaris behind him, hurried into the room, looking from one to the other questioningly.

'Here are your men, Collison,' Biggles told him tersely. 'If you have any doubt as to what their business is, there are acres of hemp growing outside and an aeroplane loaded with hashish in the hangar.'

At the word hashish Leroux and Stampoulos stirred uneasily. Stampoulos rose to his feet, and opened his mouth to speak.

'You'd better keep anything you have to say for the court,' Collison warned him curtly.

An hour later, with the prisoners handcuffed and under armed guard in the room that had been Harry Marton's prison for more than a year, and Collison's askaris rounding up the natives in the compound, the rest of the white men sat round the table recently used by Leroux and Stampoulos. Harry Marton, still looking pale and tired, was telling his story, while Collison, note-book in hand, was making notes.

'There really isn't very much to tell,' Harry was saying. 'As you probably know, I got as far as Malakal without any trouble, and it was just as I was about to leave that I met this villain Leroux.

He told me that he was a pilot and had been forced to land near Insula, where he had left his companion who was dying of fever. He asked me to go out and bring him in. What could I do ? What would you have done, Bigglesworth ?'

'I'm afraid I should have done what you did,' confessed Biggles.

'Yes, of course I had to go,' went on Harry. 'I was ahead of my time, and I worked it out that there was still a chance of getting the record. Leroux said he would come with me to show me the way. Well, we went, and I never had the slightest reason for suspicion. Sure enough, there was a crashed machine lying near the edge of the landing-ground—an old French machine, by the look of it—which Leroux said was his. I landed near it. There was nobody in it, so Leroux said that his friend must have gone down to the rest-house.

So to the rest-house we went, where a half-caste scoundrel named Sarda brought us drinks. How on earth could I have imagined that . . . well, that the drink contained dope ?'

'Of course you couldn't,' put in Biggles.

'Well, there I was. I just flopped out and that was all I knew about it. When I woke up I was at this place. Leroux afterwards told me that he and Sarda just carried me back to my own machine and he flew me here the same day. And here I have been a prisoner ever since, compelled to keep my machine in order for their use.'

'I suppose that's why they kept you alive ?' suggested Collison.

Of course. When I arrived here Leroux's mechanic was down with fever, and Leroux himself is no engineer. In any case, neither he nor his mechanic knew anything about the rigging of a Puss, nor had they ever seen an engine like mine. So they flogged me and threatened me with death unless I kept the machine in order for them. Then Barrail, the mechanic, died, and then they had to keep me. I did what they told me because I always hoped that sooner or later I'd get a chance to escape. I knew, of course, that they would never let me go willingly, because I should have gone straight to the police. Once I escaped, but the natives caught me and brought me back. I was flogged for it, and after that a leopard was always kept chained under my window to prevent me from ever trying to escape that way again.'

'We know all about that gentleman; I nearly trod on him when I was looking for you just now,' smiled Biggles.

'You knew what they were doing, I suppose ?' suggested Collison.

'No, I didn't. I never did find out, but I guessed that it was something illegal. Sometimes, after I had finished work on the machine, I was made to do housework, so I knew all about the telephone. I was working near it the other day when it rang, and in desperation I answered it, but I only had time to get out one or two words when Stampoulos came into the room and knocked me down.'

All the same, it was a lucky chance, because that 's how we first knew that you were alive,' Biggles told him. 'It was Ginger ringing up from Insula. It's fairly clear to see what happened,' he went on, turning to Collison. 'Leroux really did crash his machine, and what with that and his mechanic being sick, he was in a mess for transport. He was probably going up to Cairo by Imperial Airways to report the state of affairs at his head-quarters, or perhaps to fetch another machine, when Harry happened to land at Malakal and put an idea into his crooked mind. A crook will always choose a crooked path in preference to a straight one, so he decided to steal an aeroplane and a mechanic at one stroke. It was a clever scheme, for there was very little risk. In nine cases out of ten he would have got away with it, but

Harry happened to have a father who wouldn't take official reports for granted.'

'And what are you fellows going to do now ?' asked Collison.

'If it's all right with you, I propose to hit the breeze for England, in the Dragon, as soon as it is daylight and your men come back with our kitbags. There are four of us now, but we can manage seven, so if you like we'll give you and your two prisoners a lift as far as Malakal.'

'That 's fine,' agreed Collison. 'My fellows can march back with the native prisoners, and you can make out your reports at my head-quarters. If you'll do that I don't think any objection will be raised to your pushing straight on home.'

## CHAPTER XVII

### IN CONCLUSION

FIVE days later a touching reunion took place at Croydon aerodrome, where Mr. Marton senior, who had been notified of their coming, met his son and the three airmen who had been responsible for his rescue. Tears sparkled in the old man's eyes when he put his hands on his son's shoulders and looked into his careworn face. Biggles turned away.

'Yes, I think it's time we were moving off,' observed Algy softly.

But Mr. Marton called them back. 'Where are you going ?' he asked.

'Well—er, I don't exactly know, but I expect we're going home,' stammered Biggles. '

We've no immediate plans, if that 's what you mean.'

'Then what do you say to a little reunion dinner to-night ? I've yet to thank you for what you've done, and I'm anxious to hear the whole story; there is also a little--er—business matter to be settled yet.'

'I think that's a fine idea,' smiled Biggles. 'Seven o'clock at the Savoy ?'

'We'll be there,' Biggles assured him. 'Goodbye for the present.'

'Au revoir.'

'And that 's that,' murmured Ginger reflectively, as they walked towards the custom's barrier to check in.

Às you rightly remark, that 's that,' agreed Biggles.



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